

WHITE LIBERALISM IN BLACK COMICS: METAPHORICAL MARGINALIZATION AND
THE DISPLACEMENT OF AMERICA

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Abstract

In the wake of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, Marvel and DC Comics introduced black superheroes into their comic book series. While the comic book editors wanted to reach black audiences, they scrupulously avoided mentioning the Civil Rights Movement. To avoid the perceived controversy that accompanied movements for equal rights, they removed their new black characters from any connection to racial liberation movements. American literature has long constructed the black body as the opposite of white autonomy, authority, and power. Yet, the American superhero also embodies these same qualities. Rather than explore these contradictory identities in a black superhero, comic companies attempted to reconcile them. These reconciliation attempts reflected white fears about Black Power and led to the displacement of black superheroes from an American context through a complex construction of non-human characterizations. This study examines how white liberal comic book authors' creation of black characters impacted racial hierarchy, exclusion, and vulnerability and how the inclusion of black identities in superhero comics reified the complex constructions of power and race in American culture. Textual and visual analysis of black comics from the 1960s and 1970s comprises a bulk of the research. Textual and visual analysis of the comics from the 60s and 70s shows not only how white authors imagined black identities following the Civil Rights Movement, but also how these writers thought white readers understood black identities. This methodology is bolstered by the inclusion of interviews with writers, artists, and editors, quantitative sales data, and fan feedback provided in each comics' letters-to-the-editor column, which tell how the public reacted to these new heroes. Paradoxically, white writers' displacement of black superheroes from a contemporary American context helped these comics to become popular in black communities. While the decision to remove African American superheroes from an American context was made to sanitize comics of potentially controversial

political messages, the plot lines still involved the restructuring of identity for the black superhero—which mirrored the renegotiation of identity that was underway following the Civil Rights Movement.

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Introduction:

Temporary Blackness in Comic Books

The development of black superheroes by the comic book industry from 1966 to 1980 provided some of the most important representations of black cultural icons in the 20th century United States. From Black Panther to Green Lantern to numerous others that appeared, these characters have continued to be some of the most prominent black figures in American culture. The significance of black superheroes cannot be overstated and should be rightfully celebrated for the inclusion of black and brown bodies in an almost exclusively white literary space. However, these superheroes need to be closely examined and not just celebrated. In another context, Toni Morrison has asked for not just the representation of black characters in literature, but also for an analysis of how these characters are used by their white authors.¹ We must ask, what are the stories being told, and what are the ramifications of the inherent politics of the superpowered black body in American comic books? This dissertation begins to answer how black superheroes not only emerged, but what they conveyed to the readership that flocked to them.

In the 1960s, comics featured minority communities as societies to be investigated, saved, and assimilated. But rather than allow for black perspectives, these comics attempted to deliver anti-racist messages that ultimately argued for white liberalism and a color-blind rhetoric that demanded black communities to assimilate to white liberal values for their own salvation. These comics frequently depicted black communities as separate societies that needed to recognize the wisdom of the white hero. These depictions erased any possibility of black

¹ Toni Morrison. see fn 39.

subjectivity or positionality, instead representing black communities as othered societies needing to be saved by the white hero.

DC Comics' *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane* 106, "I am Curious (Black)," provides a meta-example of the larger issues found in the comic book industry's attempts to incorporate black experiences into popular comic books. Inspired by John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*, the comic opens with Lois Lane declaring to Clark Kent that she is going to win a Pulitzer Prize by "telling it like it is!" on "Metropolis' Little Africa."² As Lois enters Little Africa, the residents mostly ignore her because she's a white outsider. To make this point clear, a blind woman speaks to her momentarily, but walks away because "when she heard me speak... she knew I was white!"³ As Lois prepares to leave Little Africa, a black man shouts to a crowd, "look at her, brothers and sisters! She's young and sweet and pretty! But never forget... She's whitey! She'll let us shine shoes and sweep her floors! And baby-sit her kids! But she doesn't want to let our kids into her lily-white schools!"⁴ The man, Dave Stevens, argues for racial separation and black pride, a reflection of the Black Panther Party.⁵ As Lois sulks off, she thinks, "he's wrong about me... but right about so many others!"⁶ When she is unable to interview any residents of Little Africa, Lois decides to become black by using a Kryptonian plastic surgery machine to alter her appearance for 24 hours. Despite her appearance, and like many of the characters examined throughout my dissertation, Lois' white liberal ideology dominates the story.

² Robert Kanigher and Werner Roth, "I Am Curious (Black!)" *Lois Lane* 106. (DC Comics, New York, November 1970), 2.

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004), 197.

⁶ Kanigher, 4.

Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane 106 is notable because the comic discusses everyday racism in America. After becoming black, Lois attempts to hail a cab that drives past her to pick up a white fare. After she is forced to take the subway, Lois remarks, "from childhood up, they're made aware that they are different."⁷ Lois even questions whether Superman would be willing to marry a black woman. While Superman dismisses her worry and claims to be an outsider, Lois retorts, "your skin is the right color."⁸ Superman claims to be an alien other, but the story makes clear that he does not understand the racism faced by African Americans. In "I am Curious (Black)," Lois Lane discovers that racism is pervasive and real. However, the series, like most comics, doubles down on a duality of racism that blames disenfranchised black people as equally culpable for racism in America as white supremacists.

Despite discussing everyday racism, the series emphasizes a color-blind message that blames black people as equally culpable for racism as white people. When Lois meets Dave as a black woman, they quickly become friends and investigate a drug deal. When the drug dealers discover the pair, Dave is shot and Superman rushes in to save the two. As Dave recovers in the hospital, Lois volunteers to donate her blood to save Dave's life. Despite the rejection of bigotry that Lois has faced during her momentary blackness, the comic still ends with the declaration that racism must be solved by Dave and the black community. After Lois reverts to her whiteness, Superman declares that unless Dave changes his own beliefs, racism will still occur in society. "If he still hates you... with your blood in his veins... there may never be peace in this world," Superman says.⁹

⁷ Kanigher, 7.

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Ibid., 13.

The conclusion of universality and the color-blind argument is that racism can be solved, that African Americans can be assimilated, and that society can become a raceless utopia if minorities will just “let go of the past” and be willing to join with the rest of America. This is a lesson that Dave has learned since the issue ends with him thanking Lois and shaking her hand and by persuading Dave, Lois and Superman inadvertently highlight the inherent problem of color-blindness. The story ends with a hand shake and hope for a better world, even though the problems facing Dave continue to exist. Dave, Lois, and Superman have all become blind to the racial plight facing African Americans.

This dissertation seeks to examine how white liberalism manifests itself in comic books during the introduction of black superheroes. While white liberalism hinges upon the intersections of race and class, white liberalism often posits itself as a natural solution to the problems it has constructed surrounding issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Black superhero narratives reflected not only what white liberal authors thought about race in America, but also helped to shape understandings of race for millions of young comic book readers. American literature has long constructed the black body as the opposite of white autonomy, authority, and power. In comic books, the American superhero also embodies these same qualities. Rather than capture the contradictions of racial identities, comic companies attempted to reconcile them. These reconciliation attempts reflected white fears about Black Power and led to the displacement of black superheroes from an American context through a complex construction of misguided superheroic characterizations.

This duality continues today, as when white people ask if affirmative action is “Reverse Racism.” Central to the white liberal arguments is a desire to move past race, a pervasive sense of white guilt and a historical shame that would rather be forgotten than addressed. However,

racial difference cannot be forgotten because it is not historical but a continued injustice. Racism, both systemic and prejudicial, continues to operate in our society. The white liberal notion of racism ending with the Civil Rights Movement provides an unhelpful examination of history and continues to be perpetuated in popular media. This dissertation does its own small part in helping to understand the use of whiteness as a lens to explore topics of racism.

Popular Culture and the Comic Book Industry

Popular culture shapes and establishes cultural values, and those cultural values shape popular culture, which creates an ouroboros that simultaneously infuses and draws upon the cultural expectations in the United States.¹⁰ In *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture*, Shelley Streeby examines how role 19th century dime novels shaped perceptions of American empire and culture.¹¹ Similarly, from 1938 to 1980, comic books held significant sway over the American public. While the comic book market faced ebbs and flows of popularity and nearly imploded a few times, the characters created for comics spun out into a variety of extremely popular and influential media in the United States and abroad. Because many characters are popular beyond just their comics, their licensed images provide a lucrative form of revenue and highlights the importance of their representations in shaping American cultural values.

Streeby writes that it is important to understand that “popular” is constructed and rests in tension with its historical context. The introduction of black comic book characters rests amid

¹⁰ For more information on this phenomenon see: George Lipsitz. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). and Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

¹¹ Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture*. (University of California Press: Oakland: 2002), 27.

the tensions of racial identity in the United States following the Civil Rights Movement from 1968 through the 1970s. While black radicals wanted racial identity to be seen and discussed to fix long standing issues of racism, many white liberals desired for the contentious discussions surrounding racial identity to be washed away. The writers of Marvel and DC Comics created their characters in this moment of tension. Both the comic companies and the writers desired to introduce diverse characters, but simultaneously, they desired those characters to make little to no mention of the marginalization due to their racial identity. In part, this dissertation is intended to capture the tension caused by the introduction of black bodies into an exclusively white mediascape even as well-intentioned liberals wanted to show support for racial equality without addressing the underlying systemic inequality of American society.

Because Marvel and DC Comics are companies, the questions surrounding economies and choices of production are often at the forefront of the analysis of comic book characters including the Marxist critique of those choices. This important analysis has provided fruitful scholarship, most notably in Jean-Paul Gabilliet's *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*.¹² Gabilliet examines the entirety of the American comic book industry through a Marxist lens to unpack economic choices from 1938 to today. Occasionally, Gabilliet's Marxist analysis notes the generational tension between older editors and younger writers and artists. More importantly, Gabilliet demands a re-examination of the comic book industry as he notes how many scholarly works tend to overstate the significance of specific comics that provided leftist political messages. *Green Lantern Green Arrow*, a comic often highlighted in important scholarly works examining black superheroes due to its progressive political was quite unpopular, Gabilliet convincingly argues. Despite many black comic scholars arguing the

¹² Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 76.

significance of *Green Lantern Green Arrow*, Gabilliet refutes these scholarly arguments surrounding the cultural significance of the book's progressive messages. Gabilliet's analysis highlights the book's lack of popularity or traction with its audience, noting that its significance mostly stems from scholars arguing its significance rather than any success during its release for influence political narratives in comic books.

Building on Gabilliet's argument, most of the choices made by comic book companies were heavily influenced by profit motives. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's first superhero team, the Fantastic Four, developed because rival DC Comics' *Justice League* sold well. Without these profit motives and desire to expand their share of the comic book markets, a vast majority of the superheroes examined in this work would never have existed.¹³ However, the Marxist analysis of the comic book industry provides only a superficial analysis that reduces the desires of the writers, artists, and editors to monetization. This analysis directly conflicts with several accounts from various writers, artists, and editors, and assumes that the highly contentious topics of race and racism were discussed through the lens of the profitable choice. The introduction of Blaxploitation characters, like Luke Cage, followed the success of popular Blaxploitation films, but other black superheroes continued to be introduced long after the genre waned in popularity. Instead, the controversial topics of Civil Rights and racism entered into the comic book industry when the logical market choice would be to refrain from fracturing its readership with contentious political messages.

Here, I want to amend the profit driven motive narrative often used by corporations that downplays the political motivations embedded in popular media. One of the central tensions of liberalism is its ability to appear apolitical or innate in Western culture. By framing liberalism as

¹³ Gabilliet, 60.

an innate or commonsense understanding of society, liberalism manages to hide its deeply political framework and perspective. White liberalism operates as an intersection of liberal ideology, both political and philosophical, and the intersections of racial identity. In this dissertation, I use white liberalism to describe a mode or a political ideological framework that is deeply rooted in American history. In media, liberalism often manifests itself as an “easy choice”: the corporation chose to not feature politics because they did not want to hurt their bottom line and divide their readership. This explanation manages to provide a cover for liberalism as the status quo and as a non-political choice. By maintaining that liberalism is commonsense, political messages become obscured and often unexamined in media. This dissertation attempts to examine how these comics repeated the deeply political choices of liberalism by framing their examination of race in America as a non-political discussion of society.

An examination of politics and superheroes is not new or unique. In *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, Richard Reynolds argues that the superhero narrative relies on liberalism to frame issues of authority and morality.¹⁴ The first superhero, Superman, highlights classical liberalism in his adherence to individuality of FDR’s political proposals.¹⁵ The superhero is an inherently political figure, defined by his relationship to power and the law, one of the seven traits Reynolds identifies with the superhero. Like Gabilliet, Reynolds examines the changes to the comic book industry from 1938 to the present, and notes that its moral and political messages are shaped and change over time. Reynolds spends little time examining the political messages surrounding the black superhero. Bradford Wright extends Reynold’s argument to the Marvel Era, arguing in *Comic Book Nation* that Marvel Comics’ had their heroes adopt a liberal

¹⁴ Richard Reynolds, “Masked Heroes.” *The Superhero Reader*. Edited by Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer, and Kent Worcester. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 107.

¹⁵ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, “Superman” *Action Comics 1* (New York: DC Comics, 1938), 3.

perspective defined through work ethic, meritocracy, and individualism.¹⁶ Even today, Marvel frequently calls upon these liberal messages to claim a long history of progressive political involvement.

While many scholars argue that comics inherently held liberal perspectives, Ramzi Fawaz's *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* argues that the superhero operated as a key site of political discourse that incorporated radical New Left ideology into comics. Using a Queer Phenomenology lens, Fawaz argues that superheroes held a more radical perspective and that their authors addressed New Left politics through an examination of the superhero's body and new representations of community.¹⁷ Fawaz's analysis stems from an analysis that considers the superhero body as a site of political discourse. While my work heavily disagrees with Fawaz's analysis, I agree with him that the superhero is an inherently political subject. In my dissertation, I expand on Fawaz's important call to examine the body of the superhero, the communities that form around the hero, and their relation to marginalized identities.

Ultimately, my dissertation rests on my challenge to liberalism's appearance in popular media as an "invisible," non-political perspective. The inclusion of black superheroes directly created cracks in this facade, despite the desire by white authors to make liberalism appear innate and apolitical, thus exposing the deeply political motivations of writers, artists, and editors in the comic book industry. Politics were always clearly visible in superhero media. But, the inclusion of characters of color required the discussion of ongoing political movements in the United States, the representation of which revealed the white liberal underpinnings of superhero comics.

¹⁶ Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 219.

¹⁷ Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 70.

Worried black superheroes would be incorporated into black radicalism, liberal writers featured black superheroes denouncing both black radicalism and white supremacists. Such narratives created the backbone of white liberalism and color-blind political perspectives where race only matters to racists.

My work differentiates between liberalism and progressivism from a context of United States political thought. Liberalism has unquestionably dominated political thought in the 20th century United States context. In this context, liberalism often operates as a completely centrist political ideology, encompassing both major political parties, positioned against radicalism. This liberalism operates as both traditional and current political thought, highlighting the role of the individual and slightly left leaning Kennedy-esque political ethics.¹⁸ But because this liberalism is so encompassing, it might be more easily defined through what it eschews. Because of the centrist acknowledgements embedded in these comics, the political thought discards all forms of radicalism. Their messages target white supremacists and black radicalism as equally dangerous. Progressive political coalitions have a long history of betraying racial equality for other gains, one merely needs to examine Unions, but the purpose of the comics is to maintain the status quo with minimal disruption.

White and Black Identities

Central to this dissertation is the melding of race and politics in American culture through white liberalism. White liberalism operates as both racial and political theory and attempts to obscure its racial and political ties by presenting itself as the “natural” view of society. While liberalism is founded in whiteness and racial oppression, white liberalism attempts to solve the

¹⁸ Left leaning in the sense that the series often provides feel good political messages along the lines of “there is only one race, the human race.”

problems of racism, that have historically been birthed from liberalism. In other words, white liberalism is an ouroboros, a cycle that allows for continued racial oppression by refusing to address racism in American culture. In this view, liberalism is more concerned with propagating itself than addressing racism and of its other social failings.

Media plays an important role in defining racial identity by constructing and reinforcing narratives surrounding racial identity. Racial formation theory explains how cultural representation cements the formation of racial identity. In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant argue that race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation.¹⁹ The structures surrounding race are often reinforced through the cultural representation and discussions often center on contrasting whiteness and the other. This dichotomy often leaves whiteness as an unspoken racial modifier and normative identity in US culture. Both David Roediger and Matthew Frye Jacobson explore the role of whiteness as not a set identity, but a constructed one that morphs to fit the needs of hegemonic power. In *Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger notes the role of whiteness in defining the identity of the white working-class and forming racial opposition to black workers. Similarly, Matthew Frye Jacobson notes that whiteness morphed during the 19th and 20th century. As Jacobson succinctly argues in *Whiteness of a Different Color*, “races are invented categories-designations coined for the sake of grouping and separating peoples along lines of presumed difference-Caucasians are made and not born.”²⁰ In the United States, whiteness has constantly adapted to maintain hegemonic power.

¹⁹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 55.

²⁰ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 4.

Scholarship on whiteness often requires other racial representations to highlight how it operates in American society. As Jacobson notes, the purpose of racialization is one of categorizations.²¹ This inherently constructs a relational identity. Noted cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, “we cannot speak for very long, with an exactness, about ‘one experience, one identity’ without acknowledging its other side” and that “the difference matters.”²² Extending this thought how racial identity appears in the United States, whiteness often becomes legible only in the defining characteristics of what it is not. In the United States, racial identity is most often defined through the dynamics of white and other and the presentation of whiteness as normative. Working class can mean all working-class individuals, but in media, the black working class has often been compared to the white working class.

Despite the plasticity of whiteness to expand to incorporate new identities, the defining characteristic of whiteness in the United States is its hegemonic power.²³ Its hegemonic power appears throughout the United States, but its most pervasive aspect is the construction of whiteness as normative. Because whiteness is read as normative, it often operates its hidden and unnamed way. For example, the working class often means white working class. This ouroboros allows for whiteness to be presented as a default identity that reinforces normativity. In the last thirty years, scholarship has begun to highlight the effects of whiteness as a hidden or default identity in the United States. Often, it has shown that race only becomes discussed when multiple races appear, even though race is always there as a lingering identity.

²¹ Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 4.

²² Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and the Diaspora.” Jonathan Rutherford, Editor. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225-228.

²³ Twitter would have you believe its mayonnaise, maybe its hegemony and mayonnaise.

Despite featuring exclusively all-white superheroes, comics have never overlooked. Not only do early superheroes fight against extremely racist depictions of Japanese spies or African warriors, but whiteness fills entire pages of the comics. Whiteness becomes inseparable from these early heroes that stood for “truth, justice, and the American way.” In *The White Possessive*, Aileen Moreton-Robinson notes the power of racialization in daily lives as it confers unearned privileges.²⁴ Racialization becomes more apparent when considering the readership as young black and brown children also buy, read, and discuss comics with their friends. In the 1930s and 1940s, comic books were the most popular medium in America, and black and brown children bought books that featured white heroes.²⁵ The diverse readership of comics highlights that racialization is always present even when characters of color are not. The lack of examination of race and racism in superhero comics prior to the introduction of black superheroes needs to be addressed. Like whiteness, liberalism often appears as a hidden default trait in American media. The introduction of the black superhero creates a moment of rupture that highlights how liberalism defined comics through whiteness. This shift, though subtle and seemingly inconsequential, has important implications surrounding the understanding of the superhero, its role, and racial identities in popular media.

This dissertation primarily enters conversation about the adoption of white liberalism in American popular culture in the 1960s through the 1980s. During this period, many hoped that racism could be defeated through the color-blind policy that hinged upon a lack of recognition of racial identity. The addition of the prefix “white” to “liberalism” attempts to combat the

²⁴ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xii.

²⁵ A single series, *All Negro Comics* lasted for a single issue before being cancelled. It was the first and only comic book published by and for African Americans. There was not a second issue because the publisher was unable to purchase the printing paper necessary to publish.

troubling construction of a normative racial identity. In *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva makes the compelling argument about the role of white liberalism in American society that links racialized violence upon black and brown bodies in the United States to dog whistles and other forms of subtle language. As Bonilla-Silva notes, “the white commonsense view on racial matters is that racists are few and far between, that discrimination has all but disappeared since the 1960s, and that most whites are color blind.”²⁶ The term “color-blind” that Bonilla-Silva uses is the cornerstone argument of white liberalism since it envisions a world where we are blind to one another’s racial identity. This world view is not only disingenuous (we recognize racial identity whether we want to or not), but holds staggering consequences for communities of color, including the denial of their life experiences in exchange for white comfort.²⁷ This view, which Bonilla-Silva argues emerged in the 1970s, became a cornerstone of superhero comics beginning in 1966 and continues to play a significant role in comics today. My dissertation offers a unique exploration of how white liberalism shaped Africanist personas in American comics and how these personas have directly shaped the understandings of racism and black identities in American culture.

I also argue that liberalism is rooted in whiteness and desires for visibility, not inclusion. Visibility, rather than inclusion, provides a key difference in how black superheroes operate in predominantly white comic book spaces. Simply put, visibility is not a substitute for inclusion, as inclusion involves the acceptance of different identities. Visibility, on the other hand, can lead to inclusion and social acceptance but cannot be mistaken for inclusion. Activists have long argued

²⁶ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 4th Edition. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 25.

²⁷ The illogic often arguing that you cannot uphold white supremacy if you do not recognize racial identity. But this illogic does not help dismantle institutional racism.

that visibility often holds negative consequences because “visibility is a pillar of criminalization, not liberation.”²⁸ The distinction between visibility and inclusion is important, as these comics provide visibility of black superheroes, but the political messages do not support the inclusion of black political perspectives and often advocate for Black identities to assimilate to the hegemonic American values of white supremacy. Because the comics rely on visibility rather than inclusion, the appearance of black superheroes provided an artificial progressivism in superhero comics and often demonized black radical political movements.

Rather than celebrate the inclusion of non-white identities, I shift perspectives to understand that visibility is not enough to warrant celebration. Embedded in the role of the superhero is morality and justice, and the superhero narrative often operates as a morality tale, which provides value judgements that must be analyzed. This necessity only becomes compounded when race enters the conversation and white authors begin to discuss justice and Black identity. The literature on black comic book characters needs to be expanded and brought into conversation with the critical project once outlined by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*. There, Morrison calls on literary scholars to examine the ways that white writers have used a white-fabricated Africanist persona to forward their own agendas. While Morrison deconstructed these Africanist personas in classic works like Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, the project she outlined should be extended to black superheroes, who are the most significant Africanist personas in popular culture. By expanding upon Morrison’s call, we can begin to understand the role of white liberalism in comics by asking “what is the primary role of these superheroes?”

²⁸ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 18.

The demonization of black led political movements is found throughout American history, no matter how radical or centric the movement was. Martin Luther King Jr. highlights the limits of white liberalism in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, for example.²⁹ While current comics celebrate MLK as a hero, including the 1970s *Green Lantern Green Arrow* series, Dr. King would certainly have found fault with the white liberalism embedded in the series:

First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season."³⁰

King's letter pinpoints the same timidity found in the white liberal political perspective of the black comic, which agrees with the desires of racial equality, but fears potential societal turmoil. White liberalism, like the white moderate, will always choose to uphold law and order, rather than justice. In this scope, I argue that white liberalism is the new form of the white moderate that Dr. King warned American society about.

White liberalism, ultimately, provides a limited scope for understanding racism in the United States. Because white liberalism remains firmly rooted in a color-blind policy, it does not

²⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. 1963. Online: https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

³⁰ Ibid.

allow for the complete understanding of racism by limiting racism to prejudice. As Bonilla-Silva argues, “for most whites racism is prejudice, for most people of color racism is systemic or institutionalized.”³¹ The addition of white to the liberalism moniker notes a distinct worldview that heavily limits the experiences of people of color and its understanding of racism in the United States.

The rootedness of liberalism and its ties to whiteness underscore the racialized components of comic books that continue to perpetuate white comfort over systemic racism. Marc Singer’s crucial essay, “*Black Skins*” and *White Masks: Comic Books and the Secrets of Race*, notes the role of black superheroes as not a singular progressive step in race relations but a mixed bag of stereotypes amid progressive depictions of black superheroes. Singer argues that the superhero genre uses key racial concepts, like double consciousness, that are inherent in the genre. Singer’s argument highlights that superheroes, often considered a distinctly American product, could be read as racialized figures even when all the heroes are white.³² While I expand upon the racialization of superpowers and their connection to white liberalism, Singer lays the important groundwork about the genre as a whole. Adilifu Nama extends Singer’s arguments in *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*, but Nama is more concerned with the symbolism and sociological significance of Black superheroes rather than the political messages embedded within.³³ At one point, Nama writes that early black superheroes are “dipped in chocolate” and that they do not differ too far from the popular white superheroes of the 1970s and 1980s.³⁴ Nama comes close to recognizing these heroes as Africanist personas and

³¹ Bonilla-Silva, 8.

³² Marc Singer, “Black Skins and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race.” *African American Review*. Vol. 36. No. 1. 2002. 118.

³³ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black American Popular Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 55.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

even writes that Black superheroes “symbolize American racial morality and ethics,” but does not extend the work further.

The most prominent work to date on black identity in comics, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, focuses on the creation of Milestone Comics in the 1990s. Milestone comics produced characters like Static Shock, that were eventually licensed by DC Comics for use.³⁵ Jeffrey Brown provides an insightful examination in his book, which is an ethnography focusing on fan communities and exploring the intersections of race and fandom to understand why Milestone Comics ultimately failed to take hold with the public. Brown’s ethnography notes that a vast majority of comic book fans in America read DC Comics and Marvel Comics. Milestone characters only become popular because they were licensed by DC Comics later, allowing for their most prominent character, Static Shock, to receive his own television series that occasionally would cross over with the popular Batman the Animated Series, Justice League, and other DC Comics properties.

Despite their heavy considerations of race comic book literature, Deborah Whaley brings the conversations about race into discussions of gender and asks how women of color operate in the comic book panel. Whaley’s book, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels and Anime*, notes that many discussions of black superheroes only discuss the role of men. While a majority of my focus continues to be on men, I do attempt to discuss how masculinity and sexuality became central to the early black superheroes like Luke Cage. I also consider the role of gender, sexuality, and the exoticized narrative of African superheroines like Storm.³⁶

³⁵ Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*. (Jackson: U of Mississippi Press. 2001), 53.

³⁶ One Superheroine that evaded my discussion was Karen Beecher-Duncan aka Bumblebee. Created in 1976 and became a superhero the following year. In 2015, DC Comics launched a

The role of racialization in superhero comics continues to have an important effect on the discussion of race today. In 2011, Marvel Comics faced a massive controversy when they chose to kill off Peter Parker and install Miles Morales, a half Puerto Rican, half Black teen, as the new Spider-Man. This controversy became elevated outside of comic book message boards when Glenn Beck began commenting that Miles Morales was political correctness run amok and saying, “the new Spider-Man is quite great. Um. Um. He looks just like Obama.”³⁷ Similar controversies about race and Spider-Man have appeared when Donald Glover tweeted that he wanted to audition for the role of Spider-Man in the Sony reboot, *Amazing Spider-Man*. The controversy repeated itself again when Sony announced that Zendaya would play an entirely new character called Michelle in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. Many fans speculated that Zendaya would be Mary Jane or MJ, Peter Parker’s long-standing love interest, which was hinted at the end of the film when she asks Peter to call her MJ.

Even today, comic books like *Black Panther and the Crew* and Marvel’s push for diversity have caused controversy with white conservative comic book fans, who ironically, argue that they do not want politics in their media. However, the choice to include white liberal political messages, which often sanitize racial politics, provides an interesting choice of centrism rarely found in the comic book industry. The stories that developed after the Civil Rights Movement seemed more content to portray Black Power Movements and the Klan as moral equivalents rooted in a deep hatred of those with different skin color.³⁸ While Superman stood

new web series DC Super Hero Girls. While Bumblebee has become the prominent black superheroine of DC Comics, she rarely appeared as a superheroine mainstay until 2015.

³⁷ Glenn Beck, "Glenn Beck Program." *The Glenn Beck Program*. Premiere Radio Network. 3 Aug. 2011. Radio. Clip accessed from: <http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/201108030013> 2/2/12

³⁸ J.L. Bell, “The Legend of Jericho and the Teen Titans.” *Oz and Ends*. September 27, 2009.

Last Accessed June 25, 2019. Online:

<http://ozandends.blogspot.com/2009/09/legend-of-jericho-and-teen-titans.html>

for the policies of FDR, and Captain America targeted fascism, the introduction of black superheroes demanded that the writers attempt to reconcile the truth about American exceptionalism with its long history of inequality.³⁹ What unfolded in the pages of superhero comics are messy attempts at understanding racism in America.

Methodology

My primary analysis will be conducted through textual analysis. Because popular culture is indicative of the historical context from which it exists, a textual analysis must come, first and foremost, as the authors wanted to engage with their audience on issues pertaining to social justice. Textual analysis provides a direct understanding of how race and identity were constructed in the 1960s through 1980s in the popular medium of the comic book. Toni Morrison's call to scholars to examine how Africanist personas are used by white authors should be taken seriously, and we must ask how these characters reflect ongoing political discussions. Because of Morrison's important theoretical frame, textual analysis must be a central component of my work.

To provide synthetic analysis, I will draw upon numerous interviews and autobiographical material on the development of black characters in comics. The resurgence of interest in superheroes, in part due to the massively successful Marvel Cinematic Universe, has expanded the already ravenous fandom of comic books to a more generalized audience. While Spider-Man, Batman, and Superman have had a long history of successful film, television, and comic book media, less popular superheroes like Iron Man, Captain America, and Aquaman have

³⁹ Multiple stories and sources exist that note Murray Boltinoff and Carmine Infantino's reluctance to include black superheroes and hint at racist undercurrents from certain editors, but these stories do not name specific individuals.

recently found multimedia success. Consequently, both Marvel and DC Comics have adapted black superheroes to big and little screens including *Black Panther* (2018), *Luke Cage* (2016), and *Black Lightning* (2018). This expansion of fandom means that creators, writers, and artists have revisited these black superheroes by providing interviews and writing new introductions in reprinted volumes. The wealth of information surrounding popular, unpopular, and even unpublished superheroes has reached a fever pitch. Due to the newfound success of some characters, many creators, writers, and artists are rewriting their own history, especially in the wake of new black liberation movements in the United States. For instance, Stan Lee repeatedly claimed that Professor Xavier and Magneto were always meant to be analogous to Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, despite those storylines not appearing until more than a decade later, when Chris Claremont began working on *Uncanny X-Men*. Because of these revisions of memory, where possible, I defer to the comics themselves to showcase how writers thought contemporaneously about racial identity with black superheroes.

Meanwhile, comic book companies used quantitative sales data to determine if a comic series was successful, and I will utilize this information to tell which thematic trends were successful for readership. While not as significant as oral history or textual analysis, this data is directly used by the comic book industry to determine sales success. Writers, artists, and editors stole and utilized ideas in an attempt to build and create more successful characters. These characters trends were determined by sales data, which is why early African American comics tended to utilize the blaxploitation genre and springboard from the early success of Luke Cage. As sales for Cage dropped quickly, comic book characters were quickly altered to salvage their characters, meanwhile.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1: “Metaphorical Marginalization: White Liberalism and the Erasure of Black Identities,” provides the groundwork for the emergence of the black superhero. I argue that comics used metaphorical marginalization, by which I mean the use of non-human figures as metaphors to talk about racialized difference, to claim a history of progressive politics while subverting black radical political messages. The chapter is focused on the Fantastic Four and the X-Men in an attempt to show how the superhero was racialized, before shifting to show how authors constructed Storm and Black Panther via the same metaphorical marginalization lens. The effect was to shift their marginalized identity to their superpowered status rather than their racialization, a move that obfuscated how marginalization and social hierarchy work in society. By highlighting the connection of the superpowered status to racialization, I highlight how white liberalism became the framework for black superheroes.

“Chapter 2: Blaxploitation and a White Hypermasculinity,” asserts that white authors attempted to reconcile American fears of black masculinity by constructing black heroes through a capitalist heteronormative morality. White authors constructed black superheroes by emphasizing their class, gender, and sexual normativity, as a means to articulate the racialized other as a moral figure deserving of rights. This chapter examines Luke Cage and Black Lightning to see how the black superhero was untethered from the black community they police and how white authors attempted to infuse respectability politics into the black superhero. Because superheroes operate in a moral framework constructed through white liberalism, the black superhero finds respectability through gender, class, and sexual normativity.

“Chapter 3: Exiled Identities: African Americans without an America” and “Chapter 4: Melting Pot Identities: African Immigration and American Unity,” work as reflections of one

another. In Chapter 3, I argue that authors removed African American characters from Black communities and the American context to construct the black hero through a geographical or national identity rather than through their racial identity. In Chapter 4, I argue the opposite dynamic. As foreign Black heroes fight crime in America without claims to slavery or the Civil Rights Movement, white authors curbed the discussion of racial oppression. This completely untethered the Black superhero from Black communities, allowing for the Black superhero to provide the utopian color-blind dream of white liberalism.

“Chapter 5: The Black Protector: Posthuman Monsters and White Guilt,” argues that white authors constructed a final group of African American superheroes as post-racial figures to assuage white guilt and fear. By being caught in accidents, these heroes rewrite the history of black trauma and situate their pain as self-inflicted, thus allowing for the white gaze to shift blame away from racial oppression. Because the Black monstrous protector straddles the line of superhero genre and horror, these characters double down on the white liberalism inherent in the superhero genre, but also manage to unintentionally highlight the horrors caused by white patriarchal capitalism.

Each of these chapters highlights how pervasive white liberalism was in the construction of black comic book characters. While these characters superficially provided difference, Marvel and DC continued to root their black heroes in a white liberal perspective that reinforced US cultural hegemony and racial hierarchies. While white liberalism positions itself in racial and economic hierarchies, white liberalism also negotiates the role of gender and sexuality, often through the hypermasculinity embedded in the superhero genre and positioning of black women as the hypersexual exoticized other.

Conclusion

The primary motivation behind the development of this work is to highlight the pervasive nature of white liberalism in modern media. The conceits of liberalism in popular media demand an examination of how it operates. Liberalism continues to be a defining aspect of Western thought and holds significant sway in the perceptions of media. The superhero, a righteous individual defined by this power and individuality, reflects key tenets of white liberalism. The emergence of black superheroes provides a fracture that highlighted not only how liberalism operates, but its limitations for addressing social injustice in the United States, as well.

Chapter 1: Metaphorical Marginalization:

White Liberalism and the Erasure of Black Identities in Marvel Comics

In 2003, a US court determined Marvel superheroes were not human. The case, *Toy Biz, Inc. v. United States*, attempted to untangle the muddled distinction between human and nonhuman characters in Marvel Comics. Before the United States Court of International Trade, Toy Biz, Inc. argued their action figures featuring famous superheroes like the X-Men and the Fantastic Four were toys rather than dolls because their powers constituted non-human characteristics. Because dolls were subject to a higher import tariff, Toy Biz, Inc. wanted the figures to be classified as toys. US trade law defined toys as “non-human creatures” and established dolls as “representing only human beings and parts and accessories thereof.”⁴⁰ After reviewing more than sixty figures, Judge Judith Barzilay agreed with Toy Biz, Inc.’s assessment that Marvel superheroes were non-human despite fulfilling the traditional definition of dolls. Judge Barzilay reasoned in her judgement: “most are borderline in that they exhibit a mix of human and non-human characteristics such as arms and legs alongside non-human features.”⁴¹ While Marvel spent forty years constructing a blurred distinction between human and non-human, the court’s judgement established several human superheroes as non-human and some non-human characters as human. For instance, the judgement defines the Kingpin, a human crime boss, as non-human because he has a small head and large hands. Similarly, the ruling established Peter Parker, the secret identity of Spider-Man, as human and simultaneously said Spider-Man in his costume was non-human.

⁴⁰ *Toy Biz, Inc. v. United States*, United States Court of International Trade, January 3, 2003. 3. Online: https://www.cit.uscourts.gov//SlipOpinions/Slip_op03/slip-op%2003-2.pdf

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

Historically, Marvel used a human/non-human divide as a metaphor to explore racial marginalization in their comics. Beginning in 1963 and continuing through the present day, the strategy has been a perennial feature of their comic book literature. But because they never clearly distinguished between the human and non-human superhero, Marvel ultimately established a rhetorical metaphor that distorts the meaning of racial marginalization in American culture and risked establishing white identities as marginalized. *Toy Biz, Inc. v. United States* highlighted the longstanding confusions and contradictions embedded in Marvel's use of superpowers to discuss racism in American culture.

In this chapter, I critically analyze how Marvel rooted their early marginalized characters, the X-Men and the Inhumans, in a white liberal perspective of race. I devise the term “metaphorically marginalized” to describe Marvel's use of the non-human or mutants like the Inhumans and the X-Men as an analogue for racial marginalization. I first consider how Marvel's metaphor reflected white liberalism rather than radical or even progressive politics. I then shift to explain how Marvel's flawed rhetorical metaphor constructed an ill-informed comparison between the outsider and marginalized identity and thus established that all characters are equally marginalized. I conclude by examining how metaphorical marginalization in popular black characters, Storm and Black Panther, laid claim to progressive politics but actually undermined black radical political messages.

Marvel's use of the non-human superhero as a marginalized figure allowed for Marvel to claim a history of progressive politics while they simultaneously obscured racial marginalization in American society via metaphorical marginalization. Starting in 1963 with the introduction of the X-Men, Marvel has used non-human superheroes to portray marginalized identities. But metaphorical marginalization oversimplified racial marginalization by suggesting that its source

was in individual prejudice. Despite Marvel's intentions to empathize with the racially marginalized and affirm the humanity of their non-human characters, metaphorical marginalization instead presented white heterosexual men as oppressed figures. The problem with this metaphor was compounded following the introduction of black superheroes in 1966, when writers focused on the metaphorical discrimination of non-humans' superpowers rather than foregrounding the racism black identities continued to experience in American culture. Ultimately, the use of mutant and non-human identities as metaphors to discuss racial marginalization repeatedly obscured the discussion of racism and bigotry in favor of depicting white heterosexual men as marginalized figures in society.

Marginality in American Comic Books

The political messages embedded in superhero comics are centered upon white liberalism. In *Comic Book Nation*, Bradford Wright notes Marvel Comics' frequent use of addressing political topics and having their hero adopt a moderate liberal perspective, traditionally defined by elements like work ethic, rewards by merit, and individualism. These politics became central to the themes found in the works of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, during their time at Marvel.⁴² Still, while Wright discusses the liberal messages embedded in these comics, he is more concerned with how Marvel addressed these topics directly rather than through the rhetorical strategies of the comics themselves. In *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*, Ramzi Fawaz argues the superhero operates as a key site of political discourse that incorporated radical New Left ideology into comics. Extending the superhero as a site of political discourse beyond the few moments when authors directly

⁴² Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 219.

addressed politics opens new questions about how the body of the superhero and the representations of marginalization reflect American cultural ideology.⁴³ But Fawaz is primarily concerned with a queer theoretical reading of the superhero, while I extend these questions to how race operates in Marvel comics, which has long claimed a history of progressive racial political discourse.⁴⁴ Both Fawaz and Wright place importance upon the political messages in comics, but they do not address the use of race and hidden discourses of whiteness in shaping the liberal ideological messages of Marvel superheroes.

The comic book industry has long been embedded in whiteness through its writers, characters, and readers. In *Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants: Appropriation, Assimilation, and the X-Men*, Neil Shyminsky focuses on white male readers identifying with white marginalized characters, arguing that “these privileged white male readers are allowed to collapse the distance between their own experiences of marginalization and the experiences of those who have been historically outside and have been marginalized by institutions of white masculinity.”⁴⁵ Shyminsky notes the potential dangers of metaphorical marginalization for white readers, yet he leaves open the question of how the black characters are constructed through metaphorical marginalization. In other words, the Marvel use of liberal politics needs to be mapped into the topic of race to answer how Marvel used metaphors to present a moderate liberal message and how white liberalism shaped the eventual production of early black superheroes. As Toni Morrison has argued, it is not enough to merely have representation of black characters, there

⁴³ Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 70.

⁴⁴ Bob Strauss, “Interview: Stan Lee.” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2000.
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2000/aug/12/features>

⁴⁵ Neil Shyminsky, “Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants: Appropriation, Assimilation, and the X-Men,” *International Journal of Comic Art* 8, no 2 (2006), 391.

needs to be thoughtful consideration about what purpose the black character serves in a larger cultural narrative.⁴⁶

Current scholarship on black superheroes wrongly asserts these heroes represent a site of rupture from the white liberalism embedded in most superhero comics. Black comic book characters operate as extensions of fantastical metaphors rather than as a radical departure from industry practice. Current scholarship centers the emergence of the black superhero as an extension of *Green Lantern Green Arrow*, a comic book series notable for its direct and often radical political messages. In *Super Black: American Popular Culture and Black Superheroes*, Adilifu Nama argues, “now they would grapple with some of the most toxic-real world social issues that America had to offer.”⁴⁷ Certainly the emergence of black superheroes was a historic cultural moment, but this long standing and unchallenged misconception presents a site of rupture for comic books to begin featuring direct social commentary. This commentary places undue importance upon *Green Lantern Green Arrow*, a series which was a commercial failure, and minimizes Marvel’s continued use of metaphors to discuss social issues.⁴⁸ Others have passingly noted how Wakanda, a technologically advanced black city in Africa, resembles other fictional comic book civilizations like the Inhumans and Namor. By reframing black comic book characters as extensions of genre trends, they operate within a wider framework of comic book

⁴⁶ The literature on black comic book characters needs to be brought into conversation with the project Toni Morrison outlined in *Playing in the Dark*. There, Morrison calls on scholars to examine the ways that white writers have used white-fabricated Africanist persons to forward their own agendas. This conversation is extended in Amy Kaplan’s “Manifest Domesticity” which discusses how white female authors constructed foreignness and citizenship through the domestic realm. For more see: Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark*, (New York: Vintage Press, 1993); and Kaplan, Amy. “Manifest Domesticity” *American Literature*. Vol. 70. No. 3. 1998.

⁴⁷ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black American Popular Culture and Black Superheroes*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 15.

⁴⁸ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 76.

history. This history often emphasized preceding fads in the development of new comics and characters.⁴⁹

White Liberalism and the Limits of the Marvel Metaphor

Since 1963, Marvel had used the non-human as an analogue to explore racial difference. Marvel Editor-in-Chief and creator of numerous superheroes, Stan Lee argued *Uncanny X-Men* worked primarily as a metaphor for exploring racial difference, “it was a good metaphor for what was happening with the civil rights movement in the country at that time.”⁵⁰ Lee intended for the X-men and other mutants, individuals born with superpowers, to be metaphorically marginalized, by which I mean the use of the non-human as an analogue for racial marginalization, and to operate as reflections of the reader's own marginalized identities.

Despite Lee’s good intentions, the difference between Lee’s idealized audience and the actual audience problematizes the presentation of a metaphorical marginalized identity. Because most of the characters, writers, and readers in the comic book industry have historically been white, there have not been many comics devoted to the discussion of racial marginalization. Aside from a handful of comics like *All-Negro Comics* and Dell Comics’ *Lobo*, both of which lasted for one and two issues respectively, the comic book landscape was summarily white until 1966.⁵¹ The longstanding whiteness of writer, reader, and characters allowed for the rhetorical presentation of white people as surrogates for marginalized figures in society. Shyminsky asks

⁴⁹ Literature that emphasizes the importance of this *Green Lantern Green Arrow* series includes Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics*. New York: New York UP, 2016.; Adilifu Nama. *Super Black American Popular Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); and Marc Singer. “Black Skins and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race.” *African American Review*. Vol. 36. No. 1. 2002.

⁵⁰ Strauss, “Interview: Stan Lee.”

⁵¹ Shyminski, 388.

“if being a straight white “weirdo” or “geek” is equated with being a gay and/or racial minority reader and all can claim mutaninity, what kind of reader is X-Men actually soliciting and how is it empowering them?”⁵² For the readership, marginalization becomes synonymous with being an outsider and this allows for a white straight man to be rhetorically constructed as a marginalized figure.

The construction of white men as marginalized comes from rooting racism in a white liberal understanding of how racism operates in American society. In *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues, “whites and people of color cannot agree on racial matters is because they conceive terms such as “racism” very differently. Whereas for most whites racism is prejudice, for most people of color racism is systemic or institutionalized.”⁵³ The belief that racism is a sole product of individual prejudice prevents an accurate understanding of what racism is and how racism is perpetuated in American society. Bonilla-Silva ties these differences in perspective to the popular liberal ideology of racial color-blindness, the idea that one can completely disregard an individual's race to prevent racial prejudice. In other words, white liberalism argues for a color-blind ideology because it understands racism as merely individual prejudice. Worse still, color-blind ideology demands assimilation, rejects cultural heritage, and places the onus of cultural acceptance upon the victim of bigotry.⁵⁴

Lee and Kirby’s message of racial tolerance is rooted firmly in a 1960s white liberal color-blind argument about individual prejudice. As Editor-in-Chief of Marvel, Lee felt bigotry and racism needed to end to facilitate a better society. Lee wrote in a *Fantastic Four* Letters-to-

⁵² Shyminsky, 388.

⁵³ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 4th Edition. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 8.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

the-Editor column, “sooner or later, if man is ever to be worthy of his destiny, we must fill out hearts with tolerance. For then, and only then, will we be truly worthy of the concept that man was created in the image of God – a God who calls us ALL – His children.”⁵⁵ Unsurprisingly, Lee and Kirby’s comics that addressed racism and nativism directly constructed racism as the product of individual prejudice. In *Fantastic Four 21*, Lee and Kirby introduced the Hate-Monger, a KKK influenced villain that wore purple Klan sheets and preached nativist rhetoric. While the Hate-Monger never became a primary villain, the series uses him to argue that all people are the same, his victims yell, “no stop, I am a citizen -- the same as you.”⁵⁶ The story ends with the message of tolerance and arguing that racism, nativism, and white supremacy were un-American.⁵⁷ Lee and Kirby addressed racism from a white liberal perspective that argued for tolerance but never once attempted to address the problem of systemic inequality.

White writers presented the metaphorical marginalization faced by the X-Men and other Marvel heroes as the sole product of individual prejudice. The first issue of *Uncanny X-Men* quickly establishes an outsider narrative. Professor Xavier, the leader of the X-Men, informs his students, “when I was young, normal people feared me, distrusted me! I realized the human race is not yet ready to accept those with extra powers! So I decided to build a haven... a school for X-Men!”⁵⁸ Xavier’s motivations for establishing a school for the X-Men and other mutants stemmed from individuals’ prejudice towards mutants, representation a rhetorical strategy that established individual prejudice as the crux of Xavier and the X-Men’s distrust of humanity.

⁵⁵ Ivan Hernandez, *Stan Lee on the Insidiousness of Bigotry*. November 24th, 2014. Online: Last Accessed October 19, 2017. <http://boingboing.net/2014/11/04/stan-lee-on-the-insidiousness.html>

⁵⁶ Stan Lee, writer. “The Hate-Monger!” Jack Kirby, pencils. *Fantastic Four 21*. Reprinted in *Fantastic Four Omnibus vol. 1*. (Marvel Comics, New York, December 1963), 4.

⁵⁷ This point is emphasized when the Hate-Monger reveals himself to be Adolf Hitler.

⁵⁸ Stan Lee, writer. “X-Men” Jack Kirby, pencils. *Uncanny X-Men 1*. Reprinted in *X-Men Omnibus vol. 1*. (Marvel Comics, New York, December 1963), 10.

Each new comic book writer of the X-Men uses their own fictitious hate groups to hit the same beats of bigotry residing inside the individual rather than to explore systemic oppression. Over the last fifty years since they were first published, the X-Men routinely fought against mutant hate groups including the Church of Humanity, Friends of Humanity, and Humanity's Last Stand. The most notable were the Purifiers led by William Stryker, a reverend and basis for the second X-Men film, *X2: X-Men United*. Nearly two decades after the X-Men debuted, Chris Claremont and Brent Anderson debuted the Purifiers in the critically acclaimed work *God Loves, Man Kills*. The series became notable due to the heavy-handed metaphors of racism and opens with two African American children brutally murdered by a group of white individuals. The white individuals call themselves the Purifiers and only tell the children they should "know why" they're being targeted.⁵⁹ The racial undertones of white men and women referring to themselves as purifiers certainly calls into consideration hate groups and the one drop rule, a law that deemed anyone with a drop of African blood as not white. However, the next page quickly informs the reader that these children were targeted due to their mutant identity. Magneto, a mutant radical and X-men villain, discovers the children's bodies strung up on playground equipment with signs labelling them "mutie," a derogatory word for mutant.⁶⁰ Marvel comics used the Purifiers and other mutant hate groups to stand in for the KKK and other white nationalist organizations though the discussion of white supremacy is pushed aside in favor of human supremacy.

Marvel's messages of tolerance were important as radical groups attempted to combat individual prejudice and bigotry in 1960s America, but they inadvertently created an

⁵⁹ Chris Claremont, *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills*, 2nd Edition. (New York: Marvel Comics, 1982), 9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

interchangeability between the oppressor and the oppressed. Color-blind narratives problematically simplify both the oppressor and the oppressed as equally wrong for using violence. While the first issue presents humanity's bigotry towards mutants, the X-Men's primary antagonist is the radical militant mutant Magneto, an analogue for black radicalism. The X-Men's primary mission is not to advocate for equal rights but to protect humanity from other mutants because "not all of them want to help mankind!... some hate the human race, and wish to destroy it! Some feel that the mutants should be the real rulers of Earth! It is our job to protect mankind from those... from the evil mutants!"⁶¹ In simplest terms, the comic argues that the larger threat to society is not systemic oppression but any oppressed person who wants to overthrow their persecutor. The series establishes Magneto and other radical mutants as not only the equivalent of their oppressors, but as downright evil. The X-Men comics continued to underscore radical militant politics as evil when Magneto names his militant organization the "Brotherhood of Evil Mutants." Magneto as an evil oppressed figure becomes more unsettling when we consider that Stan Lee claimed Magneto and Xavier represented Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.⁶² Unsurprisingly, Lee and Kirby's white liberal politics created a false equivalency of violence between the oppressor and the oppressed. The X-Men as racial allegories offers a perverse progressive narrative and distorts Malcolm X's work fighting racial injustice as villainous ideology. Ultimately, this narrative argues the oppressed and marginalized are more villainous for acts of violence than their bigoted counterparts.

Consequently, the metaphor of mutants demanded that marginalized figures assimilate to their oppressors. The politics of the X-Men routinely focused on a future of mutants and humans

⁶¹ Lee, *Uncanny X-Men I*, 11.

⁶² Henry Hanks, "The Secret to 'X-Men's' Success." *CNN*.

<http://www.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/Movies/06/03/xmen.legacy.go/index.html>

living together in harmony. But this dream hinged upon assimilation and normativity. Each of the original X-Men can pass as human and have access to Xavier's considerable wealth, which includes a mansion and private jet. While passing certainly highlights the obvious ties of the X-Men as an analogy for racialization, it also creates troubling arguments in favor of assimilation. In the first issue, Angel, an X-Men with angelic wings, binds his wings to hide them. Angel remarks the binds "feel like I'm wearing a straitjacket."⁶³ The implications of changing oneself to make whites feel more comfortable provides direct implications towards assimilation and reflects both Lee and Kirby's decision to change their names from Lieber and Kurtzberg to be more palatable to their audience. In later comics, the X-Men would encounter the Morlocks, physically marked mutants, and argue for these mutants to rejoin and assimilate to humanity. Yet, the assimilation narrative in *Uncanny X-Men* holds obvious flaws because racially marginalized populations cannot merely assimilate and pass in society. Furthermore, the X-Men's class privilege, as well as appearing human, allows for the heroes to navigate human society and assimilate. The original series rarely spends time examining this privilege. Instead, the X-Men advocate for other mutants to be willing to hide their differences from humanity. This coupled with their policing of other mutants establishes the trend of the X-Men arguing for the oppressed to change rather than society.

The Inhumans, another superhero group created by Lee and Kirby to allegorically represent racial bigotry, offers similar white liberal color-blind arguments about assimilation in the United States. Like the X-Men, writers used the Inhumans to discuss their non-human identity as a metaphor for racial bigotry. Lee and Kirby introduced the Inhumans in the popular comic *The Fantastic Four* as a group of genetically engineered people with superpowers and

⁶³ Lee, *Uncanny X-Men 1*, 17.

contrasted the Inhumans with the Fantastic Four's humanity to explore questions about separatism and assimilation. These topics came to the forefront of American consciousness following the publication of the infamous Moynihan Report released in 1965. The Moynihan Report argued "ghetto culture," developed through self-separatism by black communities, was to blame for the problems of poverty and systemic issues.⁶⁴ Ultimately, Moynihan argued African Americans needed to assimilate to white cultural practices in the United States. As color-blindness became more popular in white liberal circles, their supporters argued it was the failure of the marginalized groups to not assimilate to dominant white cultural practices. Lee and Kirby establish the Inhumans as a slowly dying separatist culture, and the Fantastic Four argue they must join humanity to save themselves.

Kirby and Lee extended their color-blind opposition to self-segregation in the Inhumans by defining their villains through their opposition to assimilation, a strategy that establishes assimilation as favorable for society. Bonilla-Silva argues one of the key components of color-blind rhetoric is the belief that "if blacks would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less then Americans of all hues could "all get along.""⁶⁵ In other words, by forgetting about past atrocities, people of color could peaceably assimilate into American society. In a parallel representation, Lee and Kirby presented the Inhumans as distrustful of humanity due to past atrocities. Thousands of years prior, humans hunted down Inhumans due to their physical differences, and the Inhumans chose to live a separate existence from humanity. Lee and Kirby extend the argument of self-segregation and assimilation with the introduction of the Seeker, an Inhuman villain tasked with capturing the Inhumans because their "place is not among the

⁶⁴ Daniel Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action Report* (Washington DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965), 5.

<https://web.stanford.edu/~mrosenfe/Moynihan%27s%20The%20Negro%20Family.pdf>

⁶⁵ Bonilla-Silva, 1.

humans!”⁶⁶ The Fantastic Four argue with the Seeker about the Inhumans’ self-imposed segregation because they find separatism abhorrent, just as “color-blind whites abhor what they regard as blacks’ self-segregation.”⁶⁷ Lee’s writing becomes more heavy handed when the Seeker chastises the Fantastic Four, “you think you’re the only race to inhabit this planet”⁶⁸ In context the panel references the human race, but from this point forward, the comic only mentions the “race” of characters like Black Bolt and Crystal. Because color-blind rhetoric abhors self-segregation, the villains, the Seeker and Maximus, erect an impenetrable barrier around the Inhuman city Attilan to prevent an integration between societies.

Like most color-blind arguments, Marvel’s coded use of non-humans as a metaphor for racialized people placed the onus of integration and cause of bigotry upon the marginalized other. While the villains claim a cultural difference from humanity, the Fantastic Four argue the Inhumans are human. Central to this claim of cultural similarities, the Human Torch falls in love with Crystal, an Inhuman woman. Near the end of the adventure, the Human Torch passionately argues, “nobody could tell me that Crystal isn’t as human as the rest of us.”⁶⁹ Reinforcing the similarities between humanity and the Inhumans, the story begins with Crystal mistaking the Human Torch for an Inhuman due to his powers and the two start a budding romance. Despite this romance, the Inhuman question whether they can peacefully coexist with humanity. But the narrative emphasizes the Inhuman’s inability to realize their similarities with humanity caused unnecessary separatism. By the end of the story arc, Crystal and the Fantastic Four convince the

⁶⁶ Stan Lee, writer. “Those Who Would Destroy Us!” Jack Kirby, pencils. *Fantastic Four* 46. Reprinted in *Fantastic Four Omnibus vol. 2* (Marvel Comics, New York, January 1966), 16.

⁶⁷ Bonilla-Silva, 179.

⁶⁸ Lee, “Those Who Would Destroy Us!”, 17.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 14.

Inhumans to join humanity because “we’re all the same!”⁷⁰ The Inhumans realize that by not focusing on their differences, they can rejoin the rest of the world. While discussed as integration with humanity, the Fantastic Four ultimately argue for the Inhumans to assimilate to the Fantastic Four’s American culture. The Inhumans will be able to “rejoin the human race,” but only by recognizing that they are “human too.”⁷¹ Color-blindness argues the marginalized group can become fully functioning through assimilation. Similarly, the Inhumans are told they can help the most people by joining humanity and casting aside their perceived differences because they are human. These arguments stem from color-blind claims that posited “Afro-Americans were considered even more assimilation oriented than the European immigrants because it was believed that they had no ethnic culture of their own.”⁷² More troubling yet, the Inhumans readily cast aside their culture and fully embrace the trite color-blind rhetoric presented by Lee and Kirby.

It is in Lee and Kirby’s rhetorical strategies for establishing social difference in the US where we can see that Marvel’s early superheroes were built upon white liberal politics. These metaphors hit upon the same foundational themes found in white liberal politics like assimilation and color-blindness. Marvel has continued to build upon this white liberal message in their media. The 2017 relaunch of X-Men comics reaffirmed the theme of a humanity that “hates and fears mutants,” and the comic *Generation X* thematically explores how mutants can survive and assimilate. Similarly, Marvel has pushed the Inhumans into the limelight in their 2013 television series, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* In this series, the Inhumans face open discrimination from humanity, and the series draws a parallel with the holocaust as Inhumans were hunted by Nazi

⁷⁰ Stan Lee, “The Coming of Galactus” Jack Kirby, pencils. *Fantastic Four* 48. Reprinted in *Fantastic Four Omnibus vol. 2* (Marvel Comics, New York, March 1966), 4.

⁷¹ Ibid., 4.

⁷² Bob Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 7.

Hydra leader Daniel Whitehall during WWII. Marvel's discussion of discrimination continues to be predominantly from a white liberal perspective which advocates for a slow institutional change and demonizes any individuals who attempt to operate outside of traditional and acceptable avenues to create change.

A Limited Metaphor for Understanding Racism

The white liberal perspective embedded in superhero comics is inherently problematic for understanding how racism operates in the United States because it equates the marginalized subject with the figure of the outsider. Marvel Comics frequently valorized the outsider, a figure that society did not fully accept. But these comics fail to recognize the systemic dimensions of marginalized identities, which extend beyond being an outsider. The authors rarely discuss the legal, social, and cultural aspects of marginalization. Without these crucial components, any discussion about marginalization obscured the understanding of marginalized identities and caused Marvel's metaphor to obfuscate who is marginalized in Marvel comics. Worse, metaphorical marginalization only addresses racial marginalization to reaffirm a character's non-human marginalization. This comparison constructs de facto marginalized identities as merely outsiders and allows for white men to equate their outsider status with social marginalization.

The Marvel superhero is largely built upon an outsider status. The Incredible Hulk and the Thing became two popular superheroes due to their outsider identity and inability to fit into society, for example. Yet, these superheroes, while outsiders, are not marginalized figures. For instance, the Thing is a celebrity because he is a member of the Fantastic Four. While a marginalized identity operates on the periphery of society, there are more than merely outsiders. Instead, marginalized identities are pushed to the periphery of society due to systemic

oppression. Racial marginalization developed not only through bigotry but through a methodical legal and systematic construction of whiteness. The outsider can shift his identity to become accepted in society, but for the marginalized subject there is often codification of the marginalized identity that cannot merely be brushed aside.

Toy Biz, Inc. v. United States provided direct parallels to the codification of race in the United States and highlighted how Marvel failed to understand the codification of marginalization in society. U.S. Customs argued, “the few non-human characteristics the figures possess, such as claws or robotic arms, “fall far short of transforming [these figures] into something other than the human beings they represent.”” Similarly, Toy Biz, Inc. argued that these figures were non-human due to the limited definition of dolls as “representing only human beings.”⁷³ While neither side argued for a nuanced construction of identity, Judge Barzilay reasoned in her ruling that the slightest non-human characteristics defined the character as non-human. The limited definition of human provided distinct parallels to the codification of whiteness in U.S. law. The one-drop rule argued any African American ancestry made the individual non-white.⁷⁴ Both rulings created identities that lacked nuance and limited the potential for an identity to be grouped into the privileged category, just as mixed-race people are often considered to be a part of their minority group rather than white. The codification of all superheroes as non-human offered Marvel a chance to address how legal codification affects marginalization and prevents a nuanced understanding of identity. Instead, Marvel rebuffed the ruling in a press statement, which asserted that all their characters are “human with extraordinary abilities” and claimed difference is merely superficial. Marvel’s rejection of Barzilay’s decision

⁷³ *Toy Biz, Inc. v. United States*, 11.

⁷⁴ Interestingly, Marvel has featured several storylines about the X-Gene, a symbolic placeholder of the one-drop rule. Yet, in Marvel stories the X-Gene is primarily used by villains to track and kill mutants. Once again, emphasizing individual prejudice rather than institutional racism.

not only invoked Lee's original color-blind arguments, but also emphasized their characters as fluid identities, operating as simultaneously human and non-human. By brushing off the decision and claiming their characters "are living, breathing human beings- but humans who have extraordinary abilities," Marvel highlighted how privileged identities, including outsider status, allow for a malleability.⁷⁵

Marvel's assertions stemmed from the construction of a privileged understanding of identity as ultimately malleable and self-determined. The notion of a malleable identity directly ties to debates about racial fluidity and whether racial identity can change. Ultimately, scholars argued racial fluidity operates as an extension of white privilege and works as an appropriation of identity. While race is a social construct, there continues to be implications of racial identities for minority populations. Ijeoma Olou argues, "you can be extremely light-skinned and still be black, but you cannot be extremely or even moderately dark-skinned and be treated as white—ever."⁷⁶ The malleability of identity is constructed through a position of privilege, and the transition of a racial identity can only flow in a singular direction. It is impossible for a marginalized identity to transition to a privileged position. Furthermore, the appropriation of a new identity fails to understand the socioeconomic disadvantages or the inherited trauma of oppression. Actual marginalization does not allow for this fluidity, and Marvel's metaphor operates as an unstable construction of a constantly shifting identity.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Neil King Jr., "Fans Howl in Protest as Judge Decides X-Men Aren't Human" *Wall Street Journal*. January 20, 2003. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1043013622300562504>

⁷⁶ Ijeoma Oluo, "The Heart of Whiteness: Ijeoma Oluo Interviews Rachel Dolezal, the White Woman who Identifies as Black." *The Stranger*, April 19, 2017. <http://www.thestranger.com/features/2017/04/19/25082450/the-heart-of-whiteness-ijeoma-oluo-interviews-rachel-dolezal-the-white-woman-who-identifies-as-black>

⁷⁷ There also are clear differences between racial fluidity and passing. Passing needs to be understood as the denial of a racial identity in order to escape oppression.

Marvel's conflation of marginalized subject and outsider became more complicated due to the inability to distinguish between the human and non-human superhero, which allows for all characters to be read as "marginalized" non-human figures. The *Toy Biz, Inc. v. United States* case highlighted the extreme confusion for understanding the non-human and human divide in Marvel comics.⁷⁸ While only certain characters are marginalized in Marvel comics, the case ruling emphasized that all of Marvel's characters could be read as marginalized non-human figures. While the case contrasted with some of Marvel's representations, Marvel's cultural construction of the non-human played an important role in the decision as Barzilay wrote "that some knowledge from popular culture is necessary to identify certain figures."⁷⁹ For Barzilay, the fantastic storylines these characters take part in was enough to broadly classify them as non-human figures despite their diverse backgrounds. The court found "Spider-Man Action Figures" the most difficult figures to classify, but argued even the human figures, like Kraven or Kingpin, in a fantastical storyline could be read as non-human. In reference to the Kingpin toy, the court argued human caricatures are defined as dolls, but the "freakishness of the figures appearance coupled with the fabled "Spider-Man" storyline does not warrant a finding that the figure represents a human being."⁸⁰ Despite Marvel's history of arguing their characters were human with powers, Toy Biz, Inc. capitalized upon the confusing construction of Marvel superheroes and argued all characters were "non-human."⁸¹ The complete fluidity of these character's

⁷⁸ In 1993, Toy Biz, Inc. brought forth the legal dispute about whether the X-Men and other Marvel characters were human or inhuman. The legal case, which occurred from 1993 to 2003, occurred as the X-Men hit their zenith in popular culture. Chris Claremont finished his tenure on the long running series, *X-Men the Animated Series* debuted in 1994 on Fox, and Bryan Singer's X-Men feature film premiered in 2000 and was followed up with the far more successful sequel, *X2: X-Men United* in 2003.

⁷⁹ *Toy Biz, Inc. v. United States*, 21.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

marginalized status prevented a nuanced construction of marginalization because any character could be read as non-human and marginalized.

The conflation of outsider with marginalized identity becomes more troubling due to the lack of intersectional identities, which allow for the discussion of overlapping oppression and discrimination. For instance, Marvel often constructs Wolverine and Cyclops as marginalized figures, despite these characters being white heterosexual men due to their status as mutants. Similarly, Storm is constructed as a marginalized figure, but she never faces different or overlapping oppression despite being a black woman on top of her mutant status. Because Marvel did not construct marginalization as intersecting and conflated it with outsider status, the white male superhero becomes just as marginalized as his minority teammates.

By sidestepping intersectional identities, including the intersections of race, class, and gender, to focus solely on the mutant identity, these comics valorize the notion of an outsider status as equal to racial marginalization. Marvel's comparison of outsiders and marginalized identities thus muddled the message of what marginalization is. Because comic book readers and other young adults frequently identified as "mutants," metaphorical marginalization erased actual marginalization by arguing an equivalency between the two. Kitty Pryde, a teenage mutant meant to be a stand-in for teen readers, fights another boy after he calls her a "mutie." Stevie Hunter, a black woman, separates the two and demands Kitty explain why she lashed out and hit the boy, Danny. Danny yells, "Kitty swung first" and Kitty responds that she only swung at him after he said "muties are evil! They deserve whatever they get!" Despite Danny calling for the murder of mutants, Stevie chastises Kitty's use of violence and says, "they're only words, child." Kitty quickly retorts, "supposed he'd called me a nigger-lover, Stevie?! Would you be so damn

tolerant then?!!”⁸² The scene directly compares Kitty’s mutant identity with Stevie’s racial identity. Rather than argue the ability to have superpowers is not the same as systemic oppression, Stevie silently agrees with Kitty. Kitty’s outsider status not only becomes directly comparable to racial marginalization but signals to white readers that all name calling is equal, similar to the arguments white individuals make about being called “cracker.” As Bonilla-Silva discusses with color-blind racism, this view is entirely built upon white constructions of racism rather than unpacking the systemic issues racial minorities face. This exchange gives Kitty and white readers equal ground to Stevie for feeling like an outsider. By not explaining the systemic oppression or power dynamics that are at play with these words it muddled the intent of argument and inadvertently creates a false equivalency between racial marginalization and simply feeling like an outsider.

The effect of metaphors in color-blind rhetoric was the establishment of the white heterosexual male as a marginalized figure in American culture. In 1966, three years after the introduction of the X-Men, Marvel debuted the first black superhero, Black Panther. Shortly afterward, Marvel found moderate success with other black superheroes like the Falcon and Luke Cage. As Marvel opportunistically debuted black characters to reach new markets, black superheroes found themselves marginalized due to fantastical elements rather than racism. Storm faces the same discrimination as white heroes like Wolverine because Marvel distanced their heroes from actual marginalized identities and centered their superheroes in a metaphor. In *American Truths: Blackness and the American Superhero*, Consuela Francis argues “race cognizance plays a crucial role in black fans interpretation of superhero comics and accounts for

⁸² Claremont, *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills*, 15.

their desire for non-white heroes to fight alongside existing heroes.”⁸³ Ultimately, heroes of color provide readers with understandings of how race operates in American society as they fight alongside white superheroes. Because Marvel continued to focus on this non-human marginalization, the allegory allowed for white heroes to operate as equally marginalized as their black counterparts.

The Erasure of Black Identities in Early Marvel Comics

Despite the claims of progressive racial politics embedded in their comics, Marvel continued to shy away from addressing racial politics and instead operated through metaphors. The commercial success of the X-Men franchise, which held metaphorical marginalization as its operating logic, allowed for Marvel to claim a history of progressive racial political messages despite the publisher’s history of mitigating perceived controversies. Lee and Kirby were progressive visionaries during the 1960s, but over the course of fifty years, Marvel has not evolved beyond the original messages preached. Recently, Marvel announced the cancellation of numerous comic series, mostly led by black characters and women, because fans “didn’t want any more diversity.”⁸⁴ The cancellation news directly contradicted Marvel’s long history of claiming racially progressive politics in their comics. In a similar vein, the recent event comic, *Secret Empire*, tells a tale of Captain America becoming a Hydra agent, a secret Nazi cabal. Fans initially praised the series for its anti-Alt-Right perspective, yet, Marvel argued the series was not a commentary on the Alt-Right or white supremacy. The preview material released for the event

⁸³ Conseula Francis, “American Truths: Blackness and the American Superhero” *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics & Sequential Art*. Edited by Frances Gateward and John Jennings. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 141.

⁸⁴ Asher Elbein, “The Real Reason for Marvel Comics’ Woes.” *The Atlantic*. May 24, 2017. www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/05/the-real-reasons-for-marvel-comics-woes/527127/

reinforced this claim as the comic doubled down upon the metaphors of mutants as a stand in for racial minorities by featuring images of mutants being placed in concentration camps.⁸⁵ The introduction of the black superheroes created a dichotomy where Marvel continued to favor addressing the problematic metaphorical marginalization at the expense of real marginalized identities.

Despite attempting to address serious social issues in the narratives, Marvel writers rooted black character in fantastical elements that undercut their socially progressive messages. The introduction of Black Panther in *Fantastic Four* 52 offered an unprecedented reading of anti-colonialism for 1960s comics and subverted stereotypical depictions of Africa. The Black Panther, the Chief King T'Challa, invites the Fantastic Four to Wakanda, a fictional African nation. Like the Inhumans, Lee and Kirby did not provide much information about Wakanda and instead preferred to let the readers' imagination fill in the blanks of the fictional society. In the story, Lee and Kirby presented Wakanda as an isolated secret nation in possession of "modern, super-scientific wonders that we can only marvel at."⁸⁶ While technologically advanced, Wakanda is also a tribal state. This techno-tribalism subverted the traditional depictions of African tribalism found in other serial adventure stories set in Africa. The Thing, a member of the Fantastic Four, repeatedly references African refugees and Tarzan films and remains skeptical that an African nation could develop such advanced technology, "but how does some refugee from a Tarzan movie lay his hands on this type of gizmo?"⁸⁷ When told about Wakanda,

⁸⁵ Emily Gaudette, "Marvel's Teases Vicious Alt-Right Takedown in 'Secret Empire.'" *Inverse*. January 30, 2017. Online: <https://www.inverse.com/article/27122-marvel-secret-empire-nazi-hydra-anti-trump>

⁸⁶ Stan Lee, "The Way It Began..!" Jack Kirby, pencils. *Fantastic Four* 53. Reprinted in *The Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage* (Marvel Comics, New York, August 1966), 26.

⁸⁷ Stan Lee, "The Black Panther" Jack Kirby, pencils. *Fantastic Four* 52. Reprinted in *The Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage*. (Marvel Comics, New York, July 1966), 6.

the Human Torch responds with disbelief, “I know you’re connin’ me! How does an African chieftain latch onto a plane that flies by magnetic waves?”⁸⁸ Both the Thing and the Human Torch’s questions are meant to establish the twist of a powerful and technologically advanced African nation, but Lee and Kirby rooted their twist in fantastical elements. Like the Inhuman city of Attilan, Marvel presented Wakanda outside of modern humanity. As the Fantastic Four explore Wakanda, the Thing’s remarks about the complete strangeness of Wakanda and says the culture is so foreign that only Mr. Fantastic could understand it.⁸⁹ Despite encountering and humanizing alien societies, a powerful African nation outside of stereotypical depictions is too foreign to be understood by the Fantastic Four.

While the Fantastic Four reject colonialism, their message still articulates a Western imperialist narrative derived from white liberalism. Introduced as an unparalleled fighter, Black Panther easily defeats the Fantastic Four, but his abilities, only referred to as “Wakandan secrets,” are not enough to defeat the colonial villain, Ulysses Klaw. Years prior, Klaw killed T’Challa’s father and led a failed attack on Wakanda to mine a rare mineral. After working with Black Panther to defeat Klaw in the present, the Fantastic Four plead with T’Challa to become a superhero, almost exclusively defined through American cultural values. Despite presenting the horrors of colonization, the series conveniently forgets the long history of Western powers colonizing Africa and instead presents colonization as the work of an evil few. Like the Inhumans’ call to rejoin humanity, the series calls for Black Panther to assimilate to the Fantastic Four’s American values, and Black Panther agrees, “I shall do it! I pledge my fortune, my powers -- my very life -- to the service of all mankind.”⁹⁰ The authors recognized the damage of

⁸⁸ Lee, *Fantastic Four* 52, 10.

⁸⁹ Lee, *Fantastic Four* 53, 26.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

colonialism, which Klaw represented, but conclude their story with a call for assimilation and cultural imperialism, which Black Panther agrees to wholeheartedly.

When Marvel writers foregrounded messages about racism, they rooted these discussions in fictional nations to sanitize the comic of political messages. In a strange parallel, Black Panther debuted as the black liberation organization, the Black Panthers, came to the forefront of American society in 1966. Due to this coincidence, Marvel briefly changed the name of Black Panther to Black Leopard. In a comment on apartheid, *Fantastic Four 119* presented heavy social commentary but attempted to distance the discussion from American racial politics. In the issue, Black Panther has vanished in the fictional nation Rudyarda, a nation described as the “last stronghold of white supremacy.”⁹¹ While Rudyarda, named after Tarzan author Rudyard Kipling, is a stand-in for apartheid South Africa, the series intentionally distanced itself from any connection to white supremacy in the United States and the Black Panther Party. Upon being freed from prison, Black Leopard informs the Fantastic Four of his name change: “I contemplate a return to your country, Ben Grimm, where the latter term has -- political connotations. I neither condemn nor condone those who have taken up the name--”⁹² Marvel’s attempt to avoid politics caused the series to only address white supremacy and racism as a problem of the fictional nation of Rudyarda. While Black Panther offers this argument of neutrality, Marvel’s choice to disassociate with the name offers a condemnation of the Black Panther Party’s message of black radicalism. Marvel preferred to appropriate black narratives while sanitizing the story of any political message or connection to black radicalism.

Despite claiming progressive narratives, Marvel also cancelled comics with black liberation narratives, which attempted to address racism directly. Marvel quietly cancelled

⁹¹ Stan Lee, “Three Stood Together” *Fantastic Four 119* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1972), 3.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 14.

Jungle Action and removed author, Don McGregor, after the series directly discussed racism in the United States. Originally a proofreader, McGregor began writing *Jungle Action* because he complained that Marvel reprinted stories filled with racist caricatures and approached Marvel about using *Jungle Action* to showcase Black Panther.⁹³ While poorly named, critics praise McGregor's *Jungle Action* series for its powerful storytelling. The first arc, "Panther's Rage," builds upon Wakanda as a nation that defeated would-be colonizers and developed xenophobia of the West. Despite the critical praise, Marvel told McGregor to incorporate more white characters into *Jungle Action*, and McGregor's next story became "The Panther vs. The Klan."⁹⁴ Though Marvel published the series, McGregor's exploration of racism in the United States appears to be a result of McGregor's personal politics rather than Marvel's decision. McGregor's "Klan" story incorporates James Baldwin and other black cultural writers, notes the nuanced differences between the African born T'Challa and his African American girlfriend, Monica Lynne, and discusses institutionalized racism. Following McGregor's "The Panther vs. the Klan," Marvel reprinted a Daredevil storyline that featured Black Panther for *Black Panther* 23 and cancelled the comic. Marvel brought Black Panther back in his own solo series but chose not to have McGregor continue writing.

While the X-Men franchise discussed discrimination, these comics only presented it through this flawed metaphor and minimized the racial identities of their black characters. The X-Man Storm, a black woman, is one of the most successful superheroines in comics. Since Storm's creation, Marvel frequently placed her at the forefront of their marketing campaigns.

⁹³ Tom Stewart, "The Blackest Panther: Don McGregor in the Jungles of Wakanda". *Back Issue!* 1, no 27 (2008): 57–61.

⁹⁴ Kieran Shiach, "This Magazine Kills Fascists: Black Panther vs. The Klan" *Comics Alliance*. January 2017. Online: <http://comicsalliance.com/this-magazine-kills-fascists-black-panther-versus-klan/>

Despite Storm's unique identity as a black superheroine, Marvel writers rarely discussed her identity as a black woman. When authors featured her racial identity, they confined it to a pan-African context, which limited any nuanced discussion of African identities. Instead, white writers focused on the marginalized mutant heroes who fight alongside Storm to discuss discrimination. Introduced in *Giant Sized X-Men I*, alongside Wolverine, Colossus, and Nightcrawler, Storm faces an equal amount of prejudice as her white counterparts and considerably less bigotry than visually different mutants. Because comics are a visual medium, Storm's racial identity is apparent, but her racial identity never offers a point of contention for a series focused on marginalization. When introduced, author Len Wein presented Storm as a young woman whom had never set foot outside of her Kenyan village. As Xavier attempts to recruit Storm, he tells her, "people may fear you, hate you."⁹⁵ The message of a powerful black woman hated by American society echoes today, but the next panel undercuts the message when Xavier makes it clear that this fear is because she is a mutant. The thematic narrative of bigotry lands upon Nightcrawler, a mutant with the appearance of a blue demon. The public gasps at Nightcrawler's appearance, and villains yell, "you dare call that... thing-- human?!?"⁹⁶ Despite the series' intentions to tackle topics of discrimination, Marvel only explored Storm's identity through her identity as a mutant and never as a black woman.

Even after losing her superpowers, Marvel's writers continued to deemphasize Storm's racial or cultural identity in favor of her fictional marginalization. *The Lifedeath Saga* focused on Storm's mutant identity despite the loss of her powers. Part I, *Lifedeath A Love Story*, opens with Storm contemplating suicide following the loss of her superpowers. Chris Claremont provided a powerful narrative built around Storm grappling with depression but always centered her identity

⁹⁵ Len Wein, "Deadly Genesis" *Giant-Sized X-Men I* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1975), 9.

⁹⁶ Claremont, *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills*, 65.

upon her superpowers. The narrative emphasizes Storm's mutant identity through the repetition of the same line, "once upon a time there was a woman who could fly."⁹⁷ Caught between her relatively recent Americanization and her African roots, Claremont pushed aside the examination of Storm as a colonial subject in favor of a color-blind assertion that her racial and cultural identities do not matter. Over the course of part I, Storm develops feelings for Forge, a Native American mutant. In a rare moment of racial recognition, Storm asks Forge, "are you Indian?" Forge responds, "Cheyenne." Despite this recognition, the series roots itself in a color-blind argument about identity, as Forge adds, "what I was has nothing to do with who I am or the life I lead."⁹⁸ Through Forge, the authors asserted that racial identities have no bearing upon someone's life. Despite the loss of her powers, the narrative continues to tie Storm's identity to the X-Men while deemphasizing her racial or cultural identity. In *Lifedeath Part II*, Storm travels across Africa with Shani, a woman who wants to return to her homeland before she gives birth. During a discussion of family and home, Storm comments, "I never really had that... until I met the X-Men. They became my family."⁹⁹ This moment allows for Storm, like Forge, to deny that her racial or cultural identity have had a significant impact upon who she is. While writers have tied Storm to Harlem, Kenya, and Egypt; they continued to structure Storm around her mutant identity at the expense of her cultural or racial identity.

Marvel's refusal to discuss institutional racism or racism directly became more problematic when characters of color were frequently used to create a false equivalence about metaphorical marginalization and racism. Because Storm operates first and foremost as a mutant

⁹⁷ Chris Claremont, "Lifedeath A Love Story" *Uncanny X-Men* 186 Reprinted in *X-Men: Lifedeath* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1984), 3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹⁹ Chris Claremont, "Lifedeath Part II" *Uncanny X-Men* 198 Reprinted in *X-Men: Lifedeath* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1985), 53.

rather than as a black woman; her other identities are only discussed by tying them to her mutation. *Uncanny X-Men 196* spends considerable time exploring Storm's identity. Storm treks across East Africa and curses Xavier for convincing her to leave Kenya. She bemoans: "you took me from my home - because of you, I lost my soul, my oneness with the world! I lost my powers of a goddess!"¹⁰⁰ Storm challenges a hallucinatory vision of Xavier, and the sequence provides a reading of Storm as a colonial subject fighting against her split positionality between Western ideology and her own culture. Yet, the comic filters this conversation through her mutant identity and metaphorical marginalization as her comments only discuss her African identity in relation to her powers. Similarly, Storm's conversations with Forge establishes pertinent questions about colonialism, but the writers repeatedly hedge the conversation to return to mutation. When considering Forge's backstory of building weapons for the United States government, his Native American heritage offers a rich site to discuss colonialism, oppression, and the complex complicities of marginalized identities helping their oppressor. But the site of this discussion is not developed, Forge's identity as a Native American weapons manufacturer feels constrained as Forge simply argues his ethnicity has no bearing upon who he is. Despite this claim, Forge's mutant power is a "spirit-site." The writers used his racial identity to further establish his mutant identity. When Marvel introduces complicated sites of identity, they frequently become sidestepped to return to the plight of mutants, leaving numerous characters as little more than their mutant identity.

Recently, Marvel blamed the lack of racial diversity on comic book fans and cancelled numerous books featuring racially diverse comic book characters to focus on white legacy superheroes. Over the last five years, Marvel introduced diverse characters and identities to

¹⁰⁰ Claremont, *Uncanny X-Men 198*, 48.

reflect the variety of different races and cultures in America. Among these additions, critics and fans celebrated the debut of Ms. Marvel, the first Pakistani-American superhero. Similarly, writers replaced Ironman with Ironheart, a black woman named Riri Williams. As diversity appeared on the page, Marvel expanded their creative talent and hired Ta-Nehisi Coates to write *Black Panther* and *Black Panther and the Crew*. *Black Panther and the Crew* drew attention for its focus on the Black Lives Matter movement and discussion of racial issues in the United States. Fans called the series unapologetically black and praised Coates's central story, a mystery surrounding the death of a Harlem activist in police custody. Coates's themes and narrative contradicted the white liberal metaphors Marvel had been publishing for fifty years. After two issues, Marvel cancelled *Black Panther and the Crew* to focus on Marvel's original superheroes. Marvel's senior vice president of sales and marketing, David Gabriel, argued "what we heard was that people didn't want any more diversity... We saw the sales of any character that was diverse, any character that was new, our female characters, anything that was not a core Marvel character, people were turning their nose up against."¹⁰¹

Despite Marvel's claims about diversity not selling, the actual sales data points towards Marvel's willingness to give white superheroes with metaphorical marginalization narratives more time to find an audience. Aside from the obvious problems of Gabriel's claims, numerous reports found Gabriel's claims about sales figures to be false. Examining sales data, Charles Hoffman noted, "blaming "diversity" only goes so far when it is series about white men and teams of white men that have been dropping the furthest." Later, Hoffman observes, "especially painful has been the collapse of X-Men sales, which once made up Marvel's bread and butter."

¹⁰¹ Elbein, "The Real Reason for Marvel Comics' Woes."

¹⁰² The expansion of racially diverse characters caused metaphorically marginalized white superheroes, like the X-Men, to lose sales. Despite the sales decrease for X-Men related titles, Marvel began publishing four new X-Men titles following the cancellation of these diverse superhero comics. In other words, fans stopped purchasing books containing metaphorical marginalization to read about heroes of color. This caused a split in readership, but rather than cancel the white superheroes, Marvel opted to cancel their new racially diverse heroes and blame it on the fans. Hoffman also found that diverse books were largely successful in trade paperback format rather than through traditional comic book sales, implying that diverse characters found audiences outside of the traditional comic book fan. Rather than openly discuss racial bigotry and feature actual diversity, Marvel shoved these heroes aside to favor their metaphorically marginalized white heroes.

Conclusion

Marvel limited their original black characters to fantastical elements to intentionally overshadow the racial identity of their comic book characters. Gabriel's diversity comments pinpoint that Marvel views the introduction of recent characters of color as separate from their older black superheroes. While Marvel introduced prominent black cultural icons like Black Panther and Storm, these characters' identities centered on fantastical elements rather than their racial identities. According to Coates, the central idea behind *Black Panther and the Crew* was to explore the black identity of prominent black superheroes, a topic Coates claimed had not been

¹⁰² C.P. Hoffman, "No, Diversity Didn't Kill Marvel's Comic Sales." *Comic Book Resources* April 3, 2017. Online: <http://www.cbr.com/no-diversity-didnt-kill-marvels-comic-sales/>

done before.¹⁰³ Rather than explore racial discrimination and topics germane to Black Lives Matter, Marvel continued to focus on metaphorical marginalization. As writers introduced characters of color, metaphorical marginalization should have become obsolete. Black Panther and Storm, two of Marvel's most popular characters, offered the possibility for writers to discuss racial discrimination directly rather than through metaphors. Instead, Marvel chose to continue to use metaphorical marginalization to talk about issues of prejudice in comic books.

The divide between non-humans and humans presented by Marvel comics not only overshadowed the discussion of race and racism in American society but routinely created a false equivalency between the outsider status of superheroes and the racially marginalized. Writers built their metaphors to discuss social issues out of a white color-blind understanding of racism. Over the last fifty years, Marvel continued to peddle stories that argue a white color-blind perspective of race in America. This metaphor muddled conversations about who is supposed to be human or non-human. *Toy Biz, Inc. v the United States* not only demonstrated this problematic approach but also underscores the need for direct conversations about race and racial marginalization in comic media. Ultimately, the metaphor constructs racism as merely the product of individual prejudice rather than noting the systemic and structural racism in American society. During the climax of *God Loves, Man Kills*, Cyclops yells at the villain Stryker, "are arbitrary labels any more important than the way we live our lives?"¹⁰⁴ This moment encapsulates the white liberalism of Marvel comics, noting the arbitrary constructs of race, but refusing to acknowledge how they shape the way we live our lives.

¹⁰³ Eliana Dockterman, "Black Panther: Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Expanding the Black Panther Universe with the Crew" *Time*. January 20, 2017. <http://time.com/4639911/ta-nehisi-coates-is-expanding-the-black-panther-universe-with-the-crew/>

¹⁰⁴ Claremont, *God Loves, Man Kills*, 65.

Chapter 2:

Blaxploitation and a White Hypermasculinity

Superheroes operate between the poles of heroism and vigilantism, a subtle difference defined through their adherence to the law and order and their perceived legitimacy by the fictional public. When African American superheroes don a cape and mask, these perceptions often become entangled in a larger referendum on racialization, respectability, and criminalization. While the black hero finds legitimacy through respectability politics and policing black and brown bodies, law enforcement and white superheroes constantly question their motivations. Broadly speaking, the cultural signifiers of the black body offers a tenuous site between heroism and vigilantism as Jeffrey Brown notes: “if the black male body is already culturally ascribed as a site of hypermasculinity, then the combination of the two - a black male superhero - runs the risk of being read as an overabundance, potentially threatening cluster of masculine signifiers.”¹⁰⁵ Because of this threatening cluster of masculine signifiers, the black superhero must negotiate the politics of respectability and morality through a heteronormative hypermasculinity that is defined by white liberal values in an effort to establish their good intentions to the larger superhero community and negate the perception of dangerous black masculinity.

The tension between the black superhero and the public (including other superheroes, law enforcement, and even the state) is negotiated through politics of respectability and the policing of marginalized individuals to adhere to dominant group’s values. Respectability politics for African Americans centers on the performance of sexual and gender normativity in order “to

¹⁰⁵ Jeffrey Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 269.

construct themselves as moral agents deserving of rights, recognition, and resources.”¹⁰⁶

Similarly, black superheroes must justify themselves as moral agents deserving of rights and recognition to longstanding white superheroes through an adherence to white heteronormativity and hypermasculinity. The first comic book series to star a black superhero was *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*. The series frequently featured the protagonist, Luke Cage, justifying his superheroics to other white superheroes like Captain America. Cage’s early appearances presented a newfound hypermasculinity that was quickly labeled as criminal or deviant for not adhering to the white liberal morality.

The often-simplistic black white morality tales and the clear delineation of superhero and supervillain rarely allowed for a character to escape these labels prior to 1970, but Luke Cage falls outside of these simplistic labels. He operates as a “deviant superhero,” a potential threat because he does not utilize his hypermasculinity through an easily legible morality. Other heroes and the public not only perceive Cage as threatening, but supervillains celebrate Cage’s actions and demeanor. Cage is only able to find respectability and illustrate his goodness by utilizing newfound hypermasculinity in a manner that adhered to white liberal morality. The dilemma for African American superheroes hinges upon the tension between an African American masculinity associated with criminality and a superheroic hypermasculinity conflated with morality. In this article, I argue that superheroic hypermasculinity is used to overwrite black masculinity and construct newfound respectability and morality in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*.

¹⁰⁶ Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 129.

Superhero Morality

In order for minority comic book characters to become identified as respectable model citizens, they need to embrace the uncomplicated morality of social justice and altruism. As Adilifu Nama explains, “the superhero archetype is heavily steeped in affirming a division between right and wrong” and longstanding white characters like Superman or Captain America had long been constructed as intrinsically good and uncomplicated. While superhero morality was originally constructed through American ideological imperialism, by the 1970s, comics preached socially progressive themes and “became an evolving creative site for exploring questions of cultural difference, social inequality, and democratic action.”¹⁰⁷ The uncomplicated morality and normative values of heroics shifted beyond nationalist rhetoric and articulated social justice and altruism. Despite progressive themes presented in comics, these new normative values were still rooted in a white perspective and understanding of American culture. The pressure for marginalized individuals to perform as model citizens was exemplified by marginalized communities’ rejection of deviant behavior in favor of normative American values and morality. In general, pressure to perform respectability often hinged upon the “uncomplicated status - in terms of moral codes.”¹⁰⁸

Superheroic morality is rooted in hypermasculinity and violence. Since the superhero genre began in 1938, authors have used hypermasculinity to resolve conflicts in superhero comics. Psychologist and Wonder Woman creator, William Moulton Marston criticized this trend as “blood curdling masculinity.”¹⁰⁹ Hypermasculinity became conflated with morality as

¹⁰⁷ Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 19.

¹⁰⁸ Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 325.

¹⁰⁹ Nick Joyce, “Wonder Woman: A Psychologist’s Creation” *Monitor on Psychology*. Vol. 39, No. 11 2008. Online: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2008/12/wonder-woman>

heroes solved through problems through embracing their superpowers. Superman, Batman and other hypermasculine heroes physically subdue the non-normative villain in battle while usually proving their heteronormativity to a damsel in distress. Yet, black superheroes are unable to operate legibly in this moral framework due to the longstanding construction of black masculinity as criminality.

This construction of the black body with criminality contradicts the moral framework embedded in superhero comics. Critical Race Theory has already attempted to untangle the longstanding association of the black body with criminality, Angela Davis noted the “ideology power of the young black male as criminal” in American culture.¹¹⁰ Extending these arguments, the black body offers complications when imported into the moral framework of superheroics and criminality. Given that the black body has long been constructed as “the polar opposite of white autonomy, authority, difference, and absolute power.”¹¹¹ The black superhero becomes riddled with contradictions when considered in American literature’s long history of constructing the black body against the very traits that superheroes are defined by.

Using Marvel Comics’ *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* and DC’s *Black Lightning* as my primary focus, this chapter argues that black comic book characters find themselves critiqued for behavior outside of the traditional morality defined by liberalism in superhero comics before they eventually enforce mainstream values by negotiating respectability politics through hypermasculinity. I then extend the use of hypermasculinity and morality to the construction of DC Comics’ first black superhero book, *Black Lightning*. Like *Luke Cage*, *Black Lightning* must negotiate the role of the black superhero through the rigid construction of morality, liberalism,

¹¹⁰ Angela Davis, “Race and Criminalization” *The House that Race Built*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 269.

¹¹¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, (New York: Vintage Press, 1993), 44.

and hypermasculinity. Because Luke Cage is the first racialized subject to have his own comic, he largely lays the blueprint for future comics featuring black identities, and he debuted during the exploration of racialized difference that becomes so prominent in Marvel comics during the 1970s. The success of *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* made possible the emergence of other comic book series, including Black Lightning, that featured black protagonists. These early black superhero comics featured black superheroes fighting on the street to police their own neighborhoods and map white ideas of respectability onto black communities.

The Masculinity of the Black Male Superhero

Scholarship currently highlights the complexities of black superheroics as potential model citizens and these characters as more than a collection of African American stereotypes while obscuring the necessary discussion of black masculinity in its construction of the racialized body. These complexities are highlighted in Marc Singer's *Black Skins White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race*, as Singer brings Critical Race Theory into his reading of black comic book characters. Singer both praises positive black comic book characters like John Stewart and Black Lightning while lamenting the racial stereotypes in Tyroc and others.¹¹² Stewart and Black Lightning are presented as complicated racialized characters, but Singer spends no time considering how these characters are constructed through the hypermasculine laden genre. Directly building upon Singer's work, the most exhaustive work on black superheroes to date, Adilifu Nama's *Super Black American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* argues that black superheroes from the 1960s and 1970s, like Luke Cage, are a reflection of the then-current cultural politics. Nama's work provides a clear cut analysis that builds upon Luke

¹¹² Marc Singer, "Black Skins and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race." *African American Review*. Vol. 36. No. 1. 2002. 118.

Cage and Black Panther as extensions of the Blaxploitation films during the early 1970s. Nama's astutely argues Luke Cage extends beyond the Blaxploitation roots and is one of the "most inherently political and socially profound black superhero to ever emerge."¹¹³ Nama salvages Cage back from the perceived stereotypes that surround the character's early appearances and ties the later appearances of the character with the Kung Fu hero, Iron First, as a reflection of popular trends in entertainment. Christina Bearden-White extends upon these readings through an audience analysis arguing that Luke Cage operates as a unique signifier of how black superheroes were able to navigate this complicated and often contested relationship of authorship and fandom through understandings of race.¹¹⁴ The argument between fans and the authors that Bearden-White highlights is centered on the change of "jive" dialogue and other racial signifiers while ignoring Cage's masculinity. Nama, Singer, and Bearden-White root these black characters into the popular trends of a larger entertainment industry and society's cultural movements. Yet, this previous literature on the black comics often focuses solely on the role of race rather than the crucial understanding black masculinity and the superheroic hypermasculinity embedded in comics.

In *New Mutants*, Ramzi Fawaz builds his assessment of 1960s Marvel Comics through the understanding of "orientation" in Sara Ahmed's, *Queer Phenomenology*. Ahmed dissects orientation and noted a key aspect of being oriented is where "one feels at home."¹¹⁵ While the Fantastic Four are grounded in their home of New York City, both the Green Lantern and Falcon lack this orientation or grounding. Yet, location is only a brief moment, as Ahmed dissects

¹¹³ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black American Popular Culture and Black Superheroes*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 55.

¹¹⁴ Christina Bearden-White, "No Middle Ground: Reexamining Racialized Images in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*" *International Journal of Comics Art*. Vol. 16. No. 2. 2014. 174.

¹¹⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects and Others*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.

“homing” and “following a line” as important aspects of orientation that direct an individual toward finding their way.¹¹⁶ In this sense, we find a moment of rupture in Marvel Comics’ allegorical marginalization and the need to expand upon Fawaz’s original argument. While numerous white characters are marginalized with powers, they are still oriented through this grounding of a specific places and cultures which allows for the black hero to eventually become oriented towards white heteronormativity.

The orientation of the black hero towards white heteronormativity occurs through the white capitalist structures of respectability. Queer of color critique offers a unified understanding of how whiteness and heteronormativity have long been conflated in American culture and often against minority identities. As Roderick Ferguson notes in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, American culture has “defined the reality of minority cultures in terms of heteropatriarchy.”¹¹⁷ The focus on his heteronormativity of the series, allowed for comic book companies to present Luke and Black Lightning inside the traditional normative structures of liberal capitalism. Because the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality constitute the primary structures of white liberal capitalism, these heroes are deserving of the superhero title due to his adherence to the normative structures outside of race.¹¹⁸

In this chapter, I show that while obscured in current scholarship, black masculinity is a necessary component in its construction of the racialized body in the superhero genre. Despite the obvious hypermasculinity embedded in the texts, few authors have looked at the construction of black heroes and the hypermasculine morality tales embedded in the 1970s black comic book characters. Jeffrey Brown’s *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* underscored

¹¹⁶ Ahmed, 10.

¹¹⁷ Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 140.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 4.

the connections between hypermasculinity and the black body.¹¹⁹ Brown focused on how independent comic publisher Milestone Comics addressed the question of the hypermasculine by putting “the mind back in the body.”¹²⁰ Yet, Brown opened the door to ask how did the far more popular comic book companies like DC Comics and Marvel Comics address the “the potentially threatening cluster of masculine signifiers?”¹²¹ In her book, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*, Deborah Whaley drew attention to the almost exclusive focus on black male characters in comics as she carved out the space to talk about black women. While Whaley considered “black female imagery in US, African, and Asian context” she emphasized the need for an assemblage of race and gender consideration in comics and in particular the superhero genre¹²².

For the black male superhero to be perceived as a respectable model citizen, these heroes' black masculinity had to be made acceptable through embracing superheroic hypermasculinity, which is defined through white liberalism. While Brown is correct in reading blaxploitation and hypermasculinity in early black comic book characters as overtly macho, he does not explore how that masculinity is derived and limited through a white liberal intellectualism. The creation of black heroes like Black Lightning, Black Goliath, and Luke Cage all utilize white scientists to explain black superheroics. This fictional science is able to use the black body while stressing the loss of these heroes' previous African American identities, a part of which includes their black masculinity. These fictional experiments create a hybridization of “white sensibility” in a black body and create a black hero who will not disturb the existing sociopolitical inequalities and who

¹¹⁹ Brown, 269.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 270.

¹²¹ Ibid., 269.

¹²² Deborah Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels and Anime*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 11.

eventually operates, essentially, as a white, heterosexual, middle-class man or at least an extension of their values.

The Creation of the Deviant Superhero

The popularity of Blaxploitation films like *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* in 1971 paved the way for African American comic book series, less than a year after the success of *Shaft*, Marvel Comics published the first, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* written by Archie Goodwin and drawn by John Romita Sr. The series focused on Carl Lucas, a young African American who was framed for selling drugs by Willis Stryker, a Harlem gang leader and eventual supervillain, Diamondback. In an effort to gain early parole, Cage volunteers for a prison experiment and is empowered with impervious skin and super strength. Realizing he will never be set free due to the guards' corruption, Lucas escapes prison using his newfound abilities. Upon escaping, Lucas changes his name to Luke Cage, and explains that the new name is a combination of his "old one..." and the "rest is what I remember most about prison..."¹²³ Drawing upon both the conventions of the superhero genre and films like *Shaft*, Luke Cage dons a yellow and blue costume with a chain link belt and becomes a superhero in Harlem who charges for his work. Critics and fans praised the series for exploring the implications of race and class as Cage struggled to make a living as a hero for hire.

In Marvel's African American comic book series, Cage rejects traditional superheroism that was rooted in white liberalism due to economic necessities as a poor African American. Near the end of the first issue, after subduing a criminal, Cage is offered a cash reward which

¹²³ Archie Goodwin and George Tuska, "Out of Hell - A Hero!" *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 1 June 1972 Rpt. in *Essential Luke Cage, Power Man Volume 1*. (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005), 22.

provides him with “an idea how to turn what I got goin’ for me into a livin’!” Luke Cage prints business cards with his phone number and the slogan, “Luke Cage Hero for Hire,” and notes to himself “a little promotion work an’ I’m in business.”¹²⁴ By charging individuals for help Cage has rejected the altruism present in most comics and subsequently is considered an unrespectable hero to others. While not mentioned, Cage’s black superheroism is implicitly compared to other heroes when he enters the costume shop which features a Captain America costume in the foreground and Cage notes he needs to buy the cheapest costume available. Because Cage cannot afford even a knockoff Captain America costume, it becomes clear that Cage does not have the institutional resources like billionaire Iron Man or state sponsored Captain America. Cage uses the last of his reward to set up his superhero business, but the text focuses on Cage’s race rather than his class. Other “street level” superheroes like Spider-Man and Daredevil are white working-class heroes who are able to hold other jobs along with their superheroic work. Despite Cage’s desire to be a superhero, he recognizes the inequality he and others would face without the economic support white heroes have. The early issues of *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* recognized the inherent socio-economic injustices in the United States in the 1970s and formulates a hero centering on this issue rather than in spite of it. However, Cage negotiates this injustice by shedding his black identity and stressing his newfound superheroic hypermasculinity.

Because Cage rejects the traditional white understanding of superheroics, the comic forces the reader to reconsider morality and problematizes uncomplicated white liberalism. By charging for his services, Cage blurs the superhero/supervillain dichotomy since the primary difference between heroes and villains prior to *Hero for Hire* was whether one used their powers

¹²⁴ Goodwin, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 1, 22.

for personal gain. The mantra of Spider-Man, “with great power comes great responsibility,” has largely defined the genre when Peter Parker realized the error of utilizing one’s abilities for monetary gain which inadvertently resulted in the death of Uncle Ben. Cage’s newfound hypermasculinity allows for him to provide services to others but also opens him up to critique because he does not adhere to the strict white liberal understanding of heroics. The muddling of a once clear delineation generates the question for other characters; should Cage become a respectable hero and use his newfound superpowers to help others for free or for monetary gain? Of course, this question is grounded in a respectability modeled solely by white liberals and overlooks the sociopolitical issues that forced a marginalized individual to charge for his services.

Cage’s respectability is questioned by other superpowered (white) individuals because of his business, “Hero for Hire” which results with other heroes labeling him as a “deviant” hero. Because Cage blurs the hero/villain dichotomy, other heroes are suspicious of Cage’s motives and readily critique him during encounters. Superpowered otherness allows for longstanding white superheroes to ask if he is “exploiting powers that might be more nobly used.”¹²⁵ During these encounters, heroes like Spider-Man readily question Cage’s role as a “mercenary hero” and none of these white heroes consider the economic realities that Cage faces. These accusations of deviancy are extended to comics where Cage does not appear. Captain America notes, “I’ve never even met Luke Cage - and I’m not really sure I want to. This whole ‘Hero for Hire’ bit rubs me the wrong way! I mean, being an adventurer is a special kind of life - at least it is for

¹²⁵ Archie Goodwin and George Tuska, “Mark of the Mace!” *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 3 October 1972 Rpt. in *Essential Luke Cage, Power Man Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005), 49.

me! I'd never do it simply for money!"¹²⁶ Captain America, as a white well-funded hero, is unable to grasp the reasoning for Luke Cage's business and argues moral superiority from a position of white liberalism which finds Cage's work indecent.

The critiques of deviancy surrounding the Hero for Hire come to the forefront with questions of legality which ties respectability and his morality to criminality. Other heroes question Cage's respectability throughout the comic as Cage is pitted against various heroes and at times works with villains. While the comic book series refutes these questions, the potential for criminality lies in Cage's work, as a hired hero. Luke claims he will take "any case inside the law if the money's good enough - and some outside the law if I buy what you're selling."¹²⁷ When Luke Cage is hired by notable supervillain Doctor Doom to destroy rogue robots, the encounter causes Cage to fight the Fantastic Four, the first Marvel superhero team. This attack is not centered on a misunderstanding like so many other encounters, but an outright assault on the Fantastic Four headquarters. For a brief page, Cage becomes a supervillain attempting to steal technology from a group of superheroes. Eventually, Cage is forced to confront Dr. Doom, but only because Doom hired Cage "for a gig an' then split without payin' off!"¹²⁸ Just as heroes critique Cage's work, Doom congratulates Cage, "You are the ultimate, Cage! I have never seen your like!"¹²⁹ In addition to Cage's willingness to work for a supervillain, the praise from Doom reinforces the notion of Cage as an unrespectable hero. As the issue concludes, The Thing, a member of the Fantastic Four, calls Cage's actions and his silence about working for Doom

¹²⁶ Steve Englehart and Frank Robbins, "Nomad: No More" *Captain America and the Falcon* 183. (New York: Marvel Comics, 1974), 19.

¹²⁷ Gerry Conway and John Romita Sr., "...Just a Man Called Cage!" *Amazing Spider-Man* 123. (New York: Marvel Comics, 1973), 8.

¹²⁸ Steve Englehart and George Tuska, "Where Angels Fear to Tread!" *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 9 May 1973 Rpt. in *Essential Luke Cage, Power Man Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005), 175.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

criminal, saying: “It ain’t decent! I don’t even think it’s legal!”¹³⁰ Cage’s actions are continually critiqued as not only not respectable but questioned as criminal for not embracing traditional superheroics.

Cage’s rejection of altruism has effectively labeled him as a deviant among other superheroes. Just as scholars, activists, and others have argued morality as the only method for African Americans to find respectability, other superheroes frequently argue that Cage, as a marginalized individual with powers, needs to embrace the “uncomplicated morality” of superheroics. Unfortunately, the uncomplicated morality ignores the larger sociopolitical issues facing Cage and other poor African Americans.

Contesting Respectability through Heteronormative Hypermasculinity and Whiteness

Whereas the early issues of Luke Cage provide important critiques of sociopolitical and racial inequalities in American society, in later issues, as Cage becomes a more traditional hero, adopts a white liberal respectability, and the commentary on racial disparity disappears. Originally conceived as the pinnacle of black masculinity, superhero hypermasculinity and heteronormativity enables Luke Cage to present himself as a respectable hero and model citizen. As Cage becomes a model citizen, he stops charging his clients and fights alongside other superheroes as he joins popular superhero teams like the Defenders and the Avengers; e.g. he becomes a traditional superhero. Upon becoming a model citizen and traditional superhero in later issues, the sociopolitical critique present in the early comics drops out of his storyline, and Cage even argues that others need to become respectable citizens.

¹³⁰ Englehart, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 9, 190.

As Carl Lucas in the first issue, Cage's African American masculinity is conflated with criminality. Unlike other superheroes caught in scientific experiments that are often depicted as physically inferior, Cage already epitomizes black masculinity from the moment the reader meets him in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire 1*. Before we even see Lucas, the guards mention Cage's imprisonment in solitary confinement for three days longer than his sentence, a feat that no ordinary man could survive mentally. The narrative quickly catches up visually as the door opens and, Lucas is presented as physically perfect with large muscles, a square jaw, and towering over the white prison guards. As he returns to the prison yard, one prisoner notes Lucas is respected by most of the prisoners, "lotta dudes in this dump think you're something Lucas! Shades needs you to get them with us."¹³¹ While the respect prisoners have for Lucas is not directly explained, it's clearly tied to his masculinity as Lucas disarms a would be attacker with a single punch and proves his toughness to the reader as he takes a vicious beating from the guards while other prisoners cry for it to stop. Due to the beating Lucas received, he is visited by the prison doctor, Noah Burstein. Burstein reinforces Lucas as the pinnacle of black masculinity when he explains why he wants Lucas to volunteer for the project that "requires a unique breed of man" because "similar efforts have cost men's lives" but that the "health records indicate you're everything I need, Lucas."¹³² The opening quickly establishes Lucas as the epitome of black masculinity, capable of surviving what would kill ordinary men.

Lucas's backstory repeatedly ties his black masculinity to criminality. Asked by Burstein to provide more information about how he ended up in prison, the reader learns that Lucas's African American masculinity caused him to be incarcerated as his backstory repeatedly ties his black masculinity to criminality. Both Lucas and his childhood friend, Willis Stryker, fall in love

¹³¹ Goodwin, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire 1*, 3.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 8.

with the same woman, Reva Connors. Stryker starts to date Reva due to his wealth as a powerful gang leader. Despite his physical strength and good looks, Lucas admits to feeling emasculated by Stryker's power and wealth, reinforcing an identification of African American masculinity with criminality. However, when Stryker is ambushed by a rival gang, Lucas intervenes and knocks out the assailants that had bested Stryker and, in the process, wins Reva's affections. This act of violence, a display of Lucas's masculinity, allows for Lucas to date Reva while Stryker becomes intimidated by his former friend's power. Stryker, losing control of his criminal empire and emasculated, plants narcotics in Lucas's apartment. With Lucas arrested, Stryker not only wins back Reva's affections but expands his criminal empire. The series stresses Lucas's innocence, but the first issue repeatedly ties black masculinity to criminality, and it is ultimately Lucas's unparalleled African American masculinity that results in his incarceration.

Despite this association of African American masculinity with criminality, hypermasculinity offers Lucas a means to literally escape prison and achieve justice for himself. After Lucas undergoes the experiment conducted by Burstein, he is attacked by a corrupt guard. Realizing he has no chance of parole, Lucas angrily punches the wall of a prison, causing the wall to crack and discovers his "knuckles ain't even skinned."¹³³ After punching through the wall, Lucas makes a daring escape before being knocked off a cliff by a barrage of bullets which leave only bruises on his skin. The prison guards stop looking for Lucas upon discovering his shirt riddled with bullet holes and conclude that the "tide may have carried off his body, but all those holes answer any questions 'bout his bein' alive."¹³⁴ During this origin, Lucas passes from African American masculinity into the hypermasculinity of superheroes. His escape exemplifies

¹³³ Goodwin, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire 1*, 18.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

his freedom from African American masculinity, though now Cage must prove his hypermasculinity to other characters.

Cage still operates as a marginalized individual, but this marginalization stems not from his African American identity but his hypermasculinity. Admittedly, Cage is still meant to be read as African American by both the reader and other characters, however, his African American masculinity is discarded in favor of superpowered hypermasculinity. In comics racial identities are able to shift as characters, like Lois Lane, can become “black for a day” through experimental science. Similarly, Cage claims he is no longer human and his identity has shifted following the experiment, “Doc’s machine worked on my body’s cells all right... changed ‘em so I ain’t human anymore.”¹³⁵ Upon discarding the identity of Lucas, Cage discarded his original positionality and has instead opted to fully embrace his new identity rooted in the hypermasculine. Luke Cage is “a man forever set apart from others by fantastic chemistry gone berserk.”¹³⁶

While frequently questioned by other heroes about his respectability and possible criminality, Luke Cage starts to contest the labels of “unrespectable” and “criminal” by proving his role as a “model citizen” through superhuman brawls that emphasize hypermasculinity. Following the suspicious death of Norman Osborn J. Jonah Jameson, a longtime critic of Spider-Man, hires Luke Cage to capture Spider-Man. Cage ambushes Spider-Man on a rooftop with the two exchanging words and blows. During a brief pause, Spider-Man calls Cage the “clown that sells his powers – like some cheap third rate thug.”¹³⁷ Cage becomes furious, yelling “it just got personal” as he delivers a blow narrowly missing Spider-Man but destroys a brick wall. As the

¹³⁵ Goodwin, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire 1*, 20.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³⁷ Conway, 11.

hypermasculine brawl continues, Cage and Spider-Man argue about the role of the superhero, as Spider-Man describes Cage's as a mercenary, and equates Cage to the "lowest of the low."¹³⁸ Yet, Cage contests the claim that he is a lesser hero because he provides heroics for a price: "here's something you don't! Some dudes have to do this number for a livin' -- We aint all rich playboys like Bruce Wayne!"¹³⁹ In this moment, Cage directly addresses the wealthy white superhero privileges he does not have. He asserts his work not only deserves pay, but without payment he cannot operate as a hero and become a "model citizen."

Cage critiques other heroes for their privilege while arguing he cannot save others for free due to his circumstances stemming from the failures of the justice system, not his own moral failings. While Cage does use his powers for personal gain, he articulates a clear understanding of his work as respectable, "folks hire security guards, private detectives... why not someone like me?"¹⁴⁰ As Cage presents his work as respectable and legal, he problematizes the black and white understanding of morality, "Don't get ahead of yourself with all that "super-hero" talk, man... you practically call me a thief -- some kinda bum -- and now you make like it was me who's been the bad guy."¹⁴¹ In this issue of *Amazing Spider-Man*, Cage disputes being labeled as a villain for his business and argues in other comic book issues the failings of the legal system have forced him to bill the people he's helping. Cage says "wish I was unselfishly aidin' mankind like you wanted to -- Savin' the universe gratis like the Fantastic Four or the Avengers or some other local super-studs" During this argument with Dr. Burstein, Cage admits working "gratis" is admirable but that "the law's just like that experiment of yours, beautiful... long as it

¹³⁸ Conway, 11.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁴⁰ Goodwin, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 2, 31.

¹⁴¹ Conway, 18.

works! Only for me... neither of 'em did! So I lost a hunk'a my life in a cage--." ¹⁴² The legal system has not only failed Cage, but the morality presented needs to reflect on the circumstances and systemic failings instead of assuming moral failings by marginalized individuals. Cage establishes his own morality in these arguments with Burstein and Spider-Man. Upon establishing himself as a moral hero and consequently made more hypermasculine, Cage is asked to dinner by his love interest immediately following these arguments.

Through hypermasculinity, Cage can establish his heteronormativity and prove his respectability to the state. Hypermasculinity has established Cage as a moral citizen, but heteronormativity is a keystone of respectability politics. The first issue emphasizes Cage's African American masculinity and his heteronormativity in his relationships with Reva. While Cage mourns the loss of Reva, he is unable to have a heteronormative relationship and become a "respectable model citizen." ¹⁴³ In the second issue, Cage meets Dr. Claire Temple, an African American doctor. Unsurprisingly, Diamondback kidnaps Claire and Cage uses his newfound powers to save her, something he was unable to do for Reva. The parallels reinforce Cage's growing masculinity as he woos Claire through his newfound hypermasculinity.

As their heteronormative relationship grows, so does Cage's respectability. Following the death of Diamondback, police attempt to arrest Cage, but Claire vouches for him as a hero. It's important to note Cage's respectability with the state derives from Claire. Because of Claire, Cage is not arrested. Even with a barely established relationship between them, the state already responds more positively to Luke Cage. The two continue to flirt with each other, before finally kissing in *Issue 7*. The kiss occurs after Cage helps a young man being attacked in the street and

¹⁴² Goodwin, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 3, 49.

¹⁴³ Cacho, 128.

surviving a blow that “was enough to kill anyone.”¹⁴⁴ Cage is able to display heteronormativity but only as a result of his actions as a hypermasculine superhero and for the first time embraces the traditional superheroics by helping someone without asking for payment. Following the kiss in the snow, Cage and Claire are stopped by a police officer “what would Manhattan look like if everybody started smoochin’... wait a minute -- that’s a pretty dumb piece of reasoning. Merry Christmas kids.”¹⁴⁵ As the state observes his heteronormativity with Claire, Cage has become completely respectable. This newfound and complete respectability means Cage no longer needs Claire to vouch for him to the State. Later in the issue, Cage walks out of a dark alley dragging an unconscious body only to be surrounded by police, “But Cage is able to allay suspicions, particularly when he flashes his card -- a card coming to mean something to more and more New Yorkers.”¹⁴⁶ Cage has become respectable to the State through his heteronormativity, a heteronormativity gained through hypermasculinity.

Because Cage’s respectability stems from his heteronormative hypermasculinity, his respectability is threatened with emasculation when he is unable to protect Claire from a villain’s plot. Like most superheroes, Cage worries about whether he will be able to protect his loved ones from various villains. At the end of *issue 14*, Claire is framed for the murder of reporter Phil Fox by Cage’s enemy Rackham. With Claire behind bars, Cage no longer has a normative heterosexual relationship and the State no longer recognizes him as a respectable model citizen. Because of the loss of this respectability, the police are unwilling to work with Cage to solve this crime. The loss of this respectability is cemented when Cage refers to himself as Carl Lucas, signaling for the reader the loss of his respected identity and hypermasculinity. Finally, Cage

¹⁴⁴ Steve Englehart and George Tuska. “Jingle Bombs!” *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 7 March 1973 Rpt. in *Essential Luke Cage, Power Man Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005), 131.

¹⁴⁵ Englehart and Tuska, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 7, 135.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

returns to criminality, “Lucas! I’m taking you in! You and your criminal kind have terrorized this country far too long.”¹⁴⁷ With the loss of his respectability and hypermasculinity, Cage finds himself returned to his black masculinity and subsequently becomes a criminal.

Only by returning to his hypermasculinity can Cage return to being a model citizen. At the beginning of the issue Cage feels emasculated because he is unable to set Claire free through the legal system. *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* leaves little doubt that the primary wrong committed by Rackham is not framing Claire for murder but the emasculation of Luke Cage. Only by returning to his hypermasculinity is Cage able to solve the murder, as Cage discovers he is even more powerful, “You’re stronger than you thought hero! Any other joker would’ve -- naw. Worry about that later, Lucas.”¹⁴⁸ This call for strength signals the beginning of Luke Cage’s return to hypermasculinity. The latter half of the issue emphasizes Cage’s rage, power, and masculinity, as he survives multiple assassination attempts and the collapse of a building. As the issue wraps up, Cage defeats Rackham to set Claire free, allowing for the return of a normative relationship. With his heteronormative relationship restored, the State finds Cage’s actions respectable once again, “Nice work Cage! There’s no reward on these escaped cons, but we appreciate your nabbing them for us!”¹⁴⁹ In the span of two pages, Luke Cage returns to respectability in the eyes of the State by embracing his hypermasculinity as he kisses Claire outside the police station and two officers watch approvingly.

¹⁴⁷ Tony Isabella and Billy Graham, “Retribution Part II” *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 15 November 1973 Rpt. in *Essential Luke Cage, Power Man Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005), 299.

¹⁴⁸ Isabella and Graham, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 15, 299.

¹⁴⁹ Tony Isabella and Billy Graham, “Shake Hands with Stiletto!” *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 16 December 1973 Rpt. in *Essential Luke Cage, Power Man Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005), 232.

After contesting the label of unrespectable and becoming a “model citizen” through the restoration of his heteronormative relationship, Cage is finally able to become a respectable superhero. His change to respectability is signaled by his adoption of a traditional model of superheroics, including the use of a superhero name, his unwillingness to charge for service, and his respected standing with other superheroes. Yet, it's in these moments of achieving respectability by embracing traditional superheroics that Cage forgoes his identity as a black man and the critiques he provides of racial inequality. Despite being read as an African American, Cage's hypermasculinity positionality allows for the hero to begin gaining respectability, morality, and “enlightenment.” Hypermasculinity enables Luke Cage to not only defeat his enemies but often solve various conundrums, in moments of aggression and violence while utilizing his own physical strength provides “an act of frustration becomes one of enlightenment.”¹⁵⁰ African American masculinity is conflated with criminality and incarceration, but superhero hypermasculinity offers Luke Cage enlightenment. As Cage embraces hypermasculinity more, he becomes more “enlightened” to the world, which allows him to critique other racial minorities.

Even as Luke Cage embraces the hypermasculinity tied to the white liberalism featured in white superheroes, making him in part a traditional hero, his pseudonym, Luke Cage, does not embrace traditional superheroic nomenclature. The title of the comic changes in *issue 17* to *Luke Cage, Power Man*, providing the black hero with a “respectable” superhero identity. Cage notes that other heroes like Spider-Man and Captain America are more popular and perhaps he should generate a “fancy name” for himself as the series emphasizes Luke Cage, Hero for Hire is not working. Cage contemplates various names including “The Ace of Spades. Nah, too ethnic,”

¹⁵⁰ Goodwin, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* 4, 79.

““Super--” Nope been used before,” and ““The Avenging...” uh-oh better get my head together.”¹⁵¹ While Cage fights Smythe, the villain calls Cage’s actions impossible feats. Luke Cage responds: “chalk it up to black power, man! Black power, man? Power Man? Hey, I kinda like that.”¹⁵² Cage’s superhero name is directly pulled from Black Power, which certainly summoned the Black Power Movement and black radicalization from the 1970s into the minds of the readers. As Christina Bearden-White argues, “many readers of *Power Man*, however, found the name anything but empowering for African Americans and, from the editor’s response to the name shift controversy, it is obvious that profitability was, indeed, the guiding force behind the name change”¹⁵³ During this period African American superheroes almost always keep the designation of “Black” for their character names, from Black Panther to Black Lightning. It is more telling that Luke Cage and his writers intentionally avoid a name that, in his words, sounds “too ethnic.” The removal of black from Black Power emphasizes how Cage can embrace the traditional practices of superhero comics as the nomenclature of Power Man emphasizes his hypermasculinity while intentionally cutting out his ethnicity. This was reflected as Bearden-White establishes through the letters-to-the-editor page, “The next issue’s “Comments for Cage” section featured fan letters, that again, called the name shift into question and many readers wrote disparagingly about the change in Cage’s dialogue.”¹⁵⁴

With a traditional superhero name, Luke Cage no longer fights with other superheroes, instead he is invited to work with them. The Defenders, a team of various superheroes including Dr. Strange, the Incredible Hulk, and others, enlist the aid of Luke Cage in *issue 19*. However,

¹⁵¹ Len Wein and George Tuska, “Rich Man: Iron Man -Power Man: Thief!” *Luke Cage, Power Man 17* February 1974 Rpt. in *Essential Luke Cage, Power Man Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005), 332.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 343.

¹⁵³ Bearden-White, 188.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

Luke Cage declines their invitation, “I tell ya, Doc, next time you need help savin’ the world... I’m not home, okay?” It isn’t until *issue 37*, that Luke Cage joins the Defenders as a permanent member and only after he has firmly established himself as Power Man. At the end of the issue Cage notes that “Heroin’ ain’t my hobby Doc. I do this for a livin’. I don’t mind pullin’ ya out of a pinch now ‘n’ then... But I can’t afford ta.” The call for payment, causes the other heroes to look at Cage with disgust, as one notes, “You expect remuneration for aiding your fellow man? I am revolted! As the Red Guardian I am an outcast of the state, yet.” Cage starts to respond but is interrupted by Nighthawk, “Enough! Can the ideological debate, will ya? If you can’t work for free, Cage-- suppose I put you on a retainer? I’m rich remember?.”¹⁵⁵ The hand waving of wealth provides Cage with a steady paycheck as he becomes a permanent member of the Defenders. It also signals his complete transition into a respected superhero as he no longer needs to charge ordinary people in his comics. Cage has found himself a position of respectability through his role as a hypermasculine superhero and his socio-economic problems have disappeared.

The respectability politics of Luke Cage is emphasized as Marvel Comics cancelled the series on *issue 49*, wrapping up the long saga of Carl Lucas. Marvel Comics cancelled *Power Man* and rebranded Luke Cage with the hero, Iron Fist in *Power Man and Iron Fist*. The series continued *Power Man*’s issue numbers and starts with *Power Man and Iron Fist 50* “Freedom.” The series starts with a brief overview of Luke Cage’s history while emphasizing that Luke Cage is no longer bound to the history of Carl Lucas, as the hero has been exonerated and legally changed his name to Lucas Cage. Cage claims to never forget the long history of injustice he faced, “If I live forever, I’ll never forget.”¹⁵⁶ Despite never forgetting, Luke Cage embraces

¹⁵⁵ Steve Gerber and Sal Buscema, “Evil in Bloom!” *The Defenders 37*. (New York: Marvel Comics, 1976), 33.

¹⁵⁶ Chris Claremont, “Freedom” *Power Man and Iron Fist 50*. (New York: Marvel Comics, 1978), 3.

white morality as he partners up with Iron Fist, no longer tied to the history of Carl Lucas. Cage fully embraces the respectability politics of other heroes, unsurprisingly, at a time when Marvel tried to revitalize the character to appeal to the widest reader base possible.

The disappearance of the socio-economic issues signals that Cage has fully transitioned into a respectable hero and if not a “black elite” has at least aspired to the moral codes of the white middle class. Historically, the key to politics of respectability was centered on a moment when “the relatively privileged black elite turned against the black urban poor, condemning them and distancing themselves.”¹⁵⁷ Similarly, with the steady paycheck provided by Nighthawk, Cage is not only able to become a member of The Defenders but finds himself no longer concerned with issues of the marginalized. *Luke Cage, Power Man 34*, the issue debuting before the proposition by the Defenders, has Cage make a comment about how “expensive” a date Claire is. However, in the following issues monetary concern disappears as Cage bemoans the possibility of subway workers striking and other societal issues which cause him minor inconveniences with no concern with why workers might go on strike. Cage derides the subway workers not only because they have jobs to do but are preventing him from doing his. He argues that striking workers are disrespectful “idiots.”¹⁵⁸ No longer concerned with monetary issues and embracing the hypermasculinity of superheroics, Cage has come full circle and argues from the same position of privilege and “enlightenment” that Captain America had done half a decade earlier when the hero had insisted that Cage should not be concerned with money.

Cage becomes a model citizen and celebrated hero when he claims his achievements are solely his own, exemplifying capitalist notions that hard work can allow anyone to succeed. It

¹⁵⁷ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. (New York: The New Press, 2010), 213.

¹⁵⁸ Marv Wolfman and Don McGregor, “Of Memories, Both Vicious and Haunting!” *Luke Cage, Power Man 35*, (New York: Marvel Comics, September 1976), 3.

might seem disjointed for Cage to articulate capitalism once he's stopped asking to be paid for his work, but still being paid by the Defenders. With a steady paycheck, Cage can enjoy his leisure time however he chooses and in this case as a moral defender of citizens. The sociopolitical themes about economic anxiety or racial disparity that were present in the book disappear; Cage no longer must contemplate working on the weekends and instead critiques others who refuse to complete the work they've been hired for. Cage has found a freedom from the socio-economic issues through his work as a hero, he fails to recognize his newfound privilege and is able to operate as a hero full time without the need for money like billionaire Iron Man or the state sponsored Captain America. Furthermore, Cage's enemies become vampires, and other worldly beings that have been staples in comics rather than socio political issues facing African American communities.

Black Lightning - A Short Run Mirror of Luke Cage

The premiere of DC's first black superhero series, *Black Lightning*, occurred due to DC's inept attempt to replicate Marvel's Luke Cage. Like Luke Cage, Black Lightning was not the first black comic book character created by DC Comics, but the first black superhero to have his own self-titled book. According to Tony Isabella, Black Lightning's creator, "DC bought two scripts for a planned new series called *The Black Bomber*," the hero that they hoped would be their first black-led series. As a character, the Black Bomber was a white supremacist Vietnam veteran, "who, as a result of taking part in chemical experiments to allow soldiers to blend in better with the jungle, turned into a black superhero in moments of stress."¹⁵⁹ While describing the obvious problems of the Black Bomber, Tony Isabella informs the reader that "it gets worse."

¹⁵⁹ Tony Isabella, "Introduction" *Black Lightning Vol. 1*. (New York: Marvel Comics, 2016), 1.

The scripts feature the white persona attempting to save people that he “couldn’t clearly see” and discovering that the person was black, would exclaim “you mean I risked my life to save a jungle bunny?”¹⁶⁰ Due to Tony Isabella’s success with Luke Cage, DC Comics approached the writer to take over their planned *Black Bomber* series with *issue 3* and turn the character into their premier black superhero. Isabella asked DC editorial, “do you want your first black superhero to be a white bigot?”¹⁶¹ Trusting Isabella’s work on Luke Cage, DC Editorial gave him three weeks to come up with a new black superhero, and Isabella returned with Black Lightning.

Isabella recognized *Black Lightning*, and any black led series, to be an inherently political narrative. Unlike Luke Cage, Black Lightning is not the result of a science experiment gone wrong, but merely an Olympic trained athlete wanting to help his community as both a teacher and superhero. Isabella also based Black Lightning in “an urban setting because I [Isabella] had become more political since starting my career and those were the stories I wanted to tell.”¹⁶² For Isabella, this allowed for Black Lightning to provide political messages to young people and discuss ongoing issues in America and African American communities. Isabella describes a moment of clarity to make Black Lightning’s secret identity, Jefferson Pierce, a teacher because it would allow Jefferson to work alongside young people and directly discuss issues facing young people. By positioning Black Lightning in an urban school setting, Isabella planned to make an explicitly political comic.

Isabella’s plans for Black Lightning to be an explicitly political comic heavily influenced his readership and comics. In the forward of the *Black Lightning* trade paperback, Isabella notes that he frequently has people tell him they became teachers because of Black Lightning and

¹⁶⁰ Tony Isabella, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 2.

believe that teachers can make a direct difference in their communities.¹⁶³ Beyond readership, Singer criticizes the original Black Lightning comic book series, but notes the importance for the later groundswell of black superheroes in the early 1990s.¹⁶⁴ Like Luke Cage, Black Lightning's politics directly shaped its readership and future comic book endeavors, but the political messages embedded in the series provide hinge upon respectability politics and white liberalism. While Luke Cage originally provided a more nuanced discussion of social class and race, Black Lightning builds a narrative that advocates for traditional avenues of economic success without complicating how those avenues are closed to racial minorities. Instead, the series often doubles down on respectability and heteronormativity as providing a superheroic morality.

Unlike Luke Cage, Jefferson Pierce operates as a moral figure from the start of the series, and his backstory presents a hero built upon respectability politics. For Isabella, Jefferson's backstory as a gold medalist in the 1966 and 1970 Olympics provides not only the physical means to fight injustice, but a moral dedication to self-betterment.¹⁶⁵ Through his Olympic success, Jefferson gains corporate sponsorship and pays for his college education. However, this backstory also represents a quasi-respectability as Jefferson was able to escape Suicide Slum, a poor black ghetto in Metropolis, through hard work and dedication to his athletic career. Following the death of his mother, Jefferson returns to Suicide Slum as a teacher and hopes to show young black men and women that if they work hard enough, they can leave Suicide Slum. The series straddles informing the reader how extraordinary Jefferson Pierce is, a common trope in superhero comics, and telling black readers that they can escape horrible circumstances by being as dedicated as Jefferson is.

¹⁶³ Tony Isabella, "Black Lightning" *Black Lightning 1* (New York: Marvel Comics 1976), 6.

¹⁶⁴ Singer, 116.

¹⁶⁵ Isabella, "Introduction," 2.

Admittedly, the opening issue of *Black Lightning* attempts to complicate the respectability politics Jefferson offers, by noting the potential dangers of gangs in poor communities. Upon returning to Suicide Slum and Garfield High School, Principal Chaplin gives Jefferson a tour of the campus. While there, Jefferson meets a young athletic star, Earl Clifford, who introduces himself by saying, he's "called the "new" Jefferson Pierce."¹⁶⁶ After a fight with Joey Toledo, a member of street gang the 100, the gang brutally murders Earl and string him up on a backboard in Garfield High gymnasium.¹⁶⁷ The series refers to Jefferson as "one of the lucky ones," noting that Jefferson was able to escape Suicide Slum before the 100 took complete control.¹⁶⁸ While the series complicates the pressures of impoverished life in black communities through the 100, the series never explores how systemic racism or closing of traditional avenues of upward mobility to racial minorities have led to the participation in criminal activity. Instead, the series presents the participation in the 100 as merely a moral failing and builds directly on politics of respectability. Because the 100 are the sole problem of Suicide Slum, the series cannot delve into systemic racism and can only build a morality tale.

Black Lightning's superheroic morality and potential criminality becomes the focus of early issues of the series when Superman attempts to arrest the superhero. Like Luke Cage, Black Lightning needs the endorsement of white morality to operate as a superhero. In *issue 2*, the 100 frame Black Lightning for the murder of Joey Toledo. At the end of *issue 4*, Black Lightning's criminal status attracts the attention of Superman. Over the course of the issue, Black Lightning proves his superhero status by fighting Superman and subsequently having Superman

¹⁶⁶ Isabella, *Black Lightning 1*, 8.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

endorse Black Lightning as a true superhero. Because Suicide Slum is in Metropolis, Superman tracks down Black Lightning and questions the hero's morality.¹⁶⁹

The fight between Black Lightning and Superman showcases a white liberal endorsement of Black Lightning and Black Lightning's hypermasculinity, both of which establish Black Lightning as a moral figure. Superman, DC's moral center, argues "you've hurt the 100's gangsters badly. Under other circumstances, I might overlook your vigilante tactics. But you're wanted for murder, Lightning-- --And that's something I can't overlook."¹⁷⁰ Often referred to as the "boy scout," Superman and Batman often provide unshakable morality as both are two popular heroes that refuse to kill their opponents, something other popular DC heroes, like Wonder Woman, the Flash, and Green Lantern have done. The conversation establishes Black Lightning's brutal fighting as morally acceptable by presenting Superman's only complaint about the black hero being the erroneous charge of Black Lightning murdering Joey Toledo. Since the reader knows the 100 framed Black Lightning, the conversation establishes Black Lightning as a moral figure through Superman.

The white liberal morality endorses Superman, as the hero agrees to continue letting Black Lightning fight in Suicide Slum. Because Suicide Slums is in Metropolis, DC Comics needed a plausible explanation for why Superman was not fighting against the 100 and why he does not become involved following meeting Black Lightning. Despite Superman's abilities, Black Lightning argues that Superman could never fight the 100 because "it takes someone like me to fight them; someone who fights them where they're strongest. In the gutters."¹⁷¹ Similar to Luke Cage's battle with Spider-Man and Captain America, Black Lightning needs the premier

¹⁶⁹ Tony Isabella, "Nobody Beats A Superman!" *Black Lightning* 5 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1978), 1.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

superhero of DC Comics to justify his role as a superhero, though the series never addresses the logic of why Superman could not simply defeat the 100 quickly. However, this does not address the real reason for the fight, to have DC's premier superhero endorse Black Lightning as an equal.

Black Lightning's hypermasculinity becomes apparent as he battles Superman nearly to a standstill. Superman remarks, "incredible - by sheer momentum his suck punch actually knocked me off-balance! It appears Black Lightning is quite a bit stronger than early reports indicated."¹⁷² As the two fight, Black Lightning outsmarts Superman with a few quick moves that put the man of steel off balance, though Superman's sheer overpowered status allows him to eventually gain the upper hand, "oh you're beaten all right, Lightning! You're just too stupid rea--"¹⁷³ With Black Lightning nearly beaten, Superman is interrupted as the Cyclotronic Man, a supervillain, ambushes the two superheroes. Like most superhero tales, Black Lightning teams up with Superman to defeat the Cyclotronic Man, and when Superman is nearly defeated by the supervillain, saves the Man of Steel's life. The purpose of the fight establishes Black Lightning as a powerful superhero able to compete with DC Comics' most powerful heroes.

While the series offered a more nuanced reading of black communities than other comics in urban settings, Black Lightning continues to reify the racist view of the black body and the white mind as a superior combination. While Black Lightning offers a physical means to fight against the 100, Peter Gambi provides the white mind and technology to facilitate Black Lightning's superpowers. Following Earl's murder, Jefferson seeks out Peter Gambi to help him. Gambi builds the Black Lightning suit to allow Jefferson to fight against the 100.¹⁷⁴ The series

¹⁷² Isabella, *Black Lightning* 5, 4.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

presents Gambi as the brains behind Jefferson's battle against the 100. While not explained, Gambi holds ties to the Batman villain group, the League of Assassins, and Ras Al Ghul, the leader of the league, reveres Gambi enough that he has his agent seek Gambi out before operating in Suicide Slum.¹⁷⁵ Gambi provides the tactical and technical support to Black Lightning, providing not only mentorship to Jefferson, but also the suit that gives Black Lightning his lightning blasts. However, the series kills Peter Gambi in issue 7, when Gambi jumps in front of a bullet meant for Jefferson. Gambi's death allows for Black Lightning to grow as a hero and move away from the racist assumptions about black bodies and white minds, as Jefferson must do his own detective work, technology designs, and tactics.

While whiteness often overshadowed Black Lightning in the early issues of the comic, following Superman and Gambi's departure, Black Lightning moves to the central spotlight as the sole superhero in Suicide Slum. With Black Lightning on his own, the series move to establish his heterosexuality with the introduction of Lynn Stewart, Jefferson's ex-wife. Introduced briefly in *Black Lightning 3*, Lynn is quickly blown off by Jefferson as he runs off to stop a villain. Lynn appears more following the death of Peter Gambi as she comforts Jefferson during Gambi's funeral, and their relationship is fleshed out as a former couple. The introduction of a heterosexual relationship for Jefferson grows following the acceptance of white liberal superheroes. However, Lynn never becomes fleshed out in the same manner that Reva Connors does because the series was cancelled after issue eleven. While the series hints at a rekindling of romance between the two, and subsequent Black Lightning comics have established that narrative, it does not occur in the original 1970s Black Lightning series.

¹⁷⁵ Tony Isabella. "Merlyn Means Murders" *Black Lightning 2* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1976), 1.

However, following the introduction of Lynn and solidification of his heterosexuality, Jefferson no longer becomes hunted by police in Metropolis. Like Luke Cage, heterosexuality and white liberalism become signifiers for the reader that black superheroes are adhering to the superhero morality embedded in these comics. The introduction of Lynn allows for the immediate retcon of his sexual identity, introducing a romantic interest and providing a reason for why there was no romantic interest earlier in the series. The introduction of Lynn coincides with Black Lightning's respectability. Like Claire in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*, Lynn provides a role of respectability, that even a failed marriage still allows for Jefferson Pierce to be read as a respectable citizen endorsement by other superheroes and operating with the support of local law enforcement.

Like Luke Cage's beginning, Black Lightning faces the same struggles for respectability and is only able to achieve the role of respectable hero through the engagement with white liberalism. Unfortunately, DC Comics cut the series short. Black Lightning's original run only lasted for eleven issues. While Luke Cage constructs a narrative over fifty issues, the shortened series of Black Lightning lays the groundwork for the white liberal morality embedded into the black superhero including the weaving of respectability through heterosexuality. In part due to Isabella's work on Luke Cage, Black Lightning emphasizes the role of respectability in the early issues and Black Lightning finds respectability sooner than Luke Cage, but the cancelled series still leaves several loose threads that would be picked up in the second series released in the 1990s.

Conclusion

Luke Cage and Black Lightning negotiate respectability politics by slowly transitioning into a traditional superhero with few differences between them and other white hypermasculine superheroes. As Blaxploitation became less popular, Cage's sales dropped, and Marvel tried to turn the character into a traditional superhero. Cage was originally a paragon of African American masculinity in a series that began as a progressive and self-aware critique of American socioeconomic strife for African Americans and transitions into an argument for the need for a bootstrap respectability. Hypermasculinity allows for Cage to contest those that label him as unrespectable through not only violence but through his heteronormative relationship with Claire, both of which demonstrate that Cage is a "model citizen." Yet, the negotiation between a black masculinity and the white hypermasculinity informs how the hero and the white author negotiates the black identity. Cage is only able to become a complete "model citizen" by embracing a traditional superheroic morality. Over the course of five years, Cage not only completely transitions to a "respectable" superhero but finds himself making the same arguments that had been leveled at him years earlier as other workers attempt to strike for better pay and equality.

Chapter 3:

Exiled Identities: African Americans without an America

The removal of a community provides new tools to explore the superhero and allows the author to put the superhero into a variety of situations that they could never explore as a defender of their city. During the Silver Age, authors placed their heroes into new contexts and the explorer superhero became a staple as the Green Lantern, Flash, and the Challengers of the Unknown became figures that continually travelled across the universe and to new dimensions. Inherent in the methodology of the travelling superhero, authors could change the context and alter their narratives to provide new contexts that shaped the identity of the superhero. Because context and community shape the superhero, the superhero could provide new understandings of their superhero identity. Unsurprisingly, by moving black superheroes out of a United States context, the black superhero's identity shifts from African American to American. This contextual shift allows for white liberalism's post-racial context to present new unified identities.

This chapter examines the role of the African American superheroes outside of an American context. Often these black superheroes present Western ideology as a universal and natural evolution in modern societies. Despite the focus on black superheroes abroad and Marvel's inclusion of black bodies, these characters often found themselves reinforcing Western ideological imperialism. The presentation of this ideology hinged upon the African American superhero operating outside of America and explored other nations or distant planets to allow for the hero to "lose" their racial identity and present a unified understanding of American identity while subscribing to the white liberal ideology.

The two primary characters explored in this chapter, DC Comics' John Stewart and Marvel's the Falcon, are often removed from American context and black communities to create

an identity “devoid” of racialization. For instance, by operating outside of the United States, the Falcon becomes discussed as an American agent, rather than an African American and while flying through space, aliens refer to John Stewart as an Earthman. This chapter will also explore secondary characters like Bill Foster, James Rhodes, and Gabriel Jones, black supporting characters that are not exiled from America, but fight against outside threats to America, which allows for these supporting characters to be constructed in a similar manner. In this chapter, I argue that the next group of African American heroes to debut were constructed as nomadic figures, untethered from black communities. This nomadism allowed for black superheroes to operate without disrupting the inherent white liberalism and white supremacy embedded in American popular media and become agents of American empire. The nomadic black superhero provided not only a unified understanding of America, but also allowed for the articulation of white liberalism’s hierarchical ideology as a universal sensibility. Despite this intention, these characters also highlighted minority marginalization as exiles and outsiders of American society.

The Nomadic Hero

Current academic literature on the importance of black superheroes hinges upon the importance of *Green Lantern Green Arrow*, an early 1970s comic that openly discussed societal issues like racism, classism, and the heroin epidemic. Both Marc Singer’s *Black Skins’ and White Masks* and Adilifu Nama’s *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* cite the importance of *Green Lantern Green Arrow* as a shaping force in the eventual rejection of metaphorical marginalization and open discussion of societal issues in America. In his analysis of the series, Nama writes, “now they would grapple with some of the most toxic real-world

social issues that America had to offer.”¹⁷⁶ Both Nama and Singer overstate the role of *Green Lantern Green Arrow* in shaping comic book history.

Nama and Singer’s argument surrounding a shift from the Silver Age following the publication of *Green Lantern Green Arrow* does not fit the larger historical narrative of the comic book industry. Jean-Paul Gabilliet exhaustive history, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* briefly notes that the series was perceived to have “disappointing commercial results” and these “instances of radical social criticism did not initiate a trend.”¹⁷⁷ While Gabilliet underscores that *Green Lantern Green Arrow* did not establish a new trend, he ends his analysis noting “Marvel would opportunistically release titles designed to cash in on the growing interest for minority characters- primarily African Americans.”¹⁷⁸ Marvel would publish *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* in 1972, but they had developed two black superheroes long before *Green Lantern Green Arrow* debuted in 1970. However, the nomadic superhero took a new role following *Green Lantern Green Arrow*, no longer just globetrotting or space faring, the nomadic hero now could travel across America. This chapter will spend a considerable time on *Green Lantern Green Arrow*, not because it shaped comic books for the following decade, but because it lays the groundwork for the eventual inclusion of John Stewart, a Green Lantern introduced during this era and the series’ continued building of the white liberal political messages found during *Green Lantern Green Arrow*’s run. In fact, *Green Lantern Green Arrow* spends more time discussing race than the issues featuring John Stewart, one of the first African American superheroes.

¹⁷⁶ Adilifu Nama, *Super Black American Popular Culture and Black Superheroes*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 15.

¹⁷⁷ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 75.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 76.

Because race can be oriented through the context of the society it operates in, central to the discussion of the exiled African American superheroes is the discussion of the nomadic hero. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant note in *Racial Formation in the United States*, we have to consider the “social nature of race, the absence of any essential racial characteristics, the historical flexibility of racial meaning and categories, the conflictual character of race as both the “micro-” and “macro-social” levels, and the irreducible political aspects of racial dynamics.”¹⁷⁹ In other words, the social and historical flexibility of race creates meaning in different cultural and social contexts. Similar in fiction, identity was reconstructed as heroes interacted with fictitious cultures, alien societies, and otherworldly heroes and created new questions about how they fit into them. As African American heroes travelled the stars, writers presented their identity as an Earthman rather than African American. These comics emphasized the social construction of race while attempting to present a unified American or human identity.

The discourse surrounding superheroes post Marvel stresses the concept of the superhero as a domestic alien, a self-sacrificing other, or a category-defying mutant. Heroes like Spider-Man, the Thing, the Hulk and numerous other heroes are alienated and become marginalized due to their “otherworldliness” but are always tempered through their ties to community and family. These new communities are non-normativity and implicitly queer models that “reinvented the superhero as a biological misfit and social outcast whose refusal or failure to conform to the norms of social legibility provided the grounds for a new kind of political community.”¹⁸⁰ These new communities often stretch the bounds of traditionally defined normativity, but do not break these boundaries and often call for the other to join white liberalism. In this chapter, I examine

¹⁷⁹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4.

¹⁸⁰ Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 9.

how the white liberal sensibilities inherent in the superhero are often presented as universal when situated outside of a Western context and how white liberalism situates the African American superhero in exile.

In 1974, as impeachment loomed close for Richard Nixon, Steve Rogers renounced his superhero moniker, Captain America. The cover of *Captain America and the Falcon* 176 features Steve walking away from his fellow Avengers, a dark look across his face as he proclaims, “I’m renouncing my Captain America Identity -- Forever!” In this issue, Steve renounces his superhero identity due to the revelation that the President is in league with a supervillain organization. In reality, the writers wanted to respond to the Watergate Tapes, which dramatically shifted public perception of President Nixon. In the comic, Steve feels lost in the current American political climate and decides he cannot represent this new America, an America that is devoid of a unified identity. A few issues later, Hawkeye convinces Steve to become a new superhero, arguing “I’m just saying you shouldn’t waste these powers of yours because of the craziness in Washington” and the ending preview for the next issue teases: “Nomad: A man without a country.”¹⁸¹ The following issues follow on Steve’s decision to be a man without a country, as he thinks to himself, “Nuts to the whole blamed Washington crew! They’ve had their version of America and I’ve had mine!”¹⁸² Because Steve feels untethered to the understanding of modern America, he adopts the name Nomad. While only a brief story arc, this storyline highlights the importance of the community and context surrounding the individual superhero.

¹⁸¹ Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “Slings and Arrows” *Captain America* 179 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1974), 18.

¹⁸² Steve Englehart and Sal Buscema, “The Comics of the Nomad” *Captain America* 180 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1974), 2

The transition from Captain America to Nomad derives from a political context, but as Nomad, the writers could separate Steve Rogers from the divisive American political climate. From the start, Captain America was a heavily political character that originally advocated for US intervention in Europe prior to WWII. His political ties continue to present themselves, often in a mishmash of white liberalism and US imperialism, but as Americans became more divided over the issues of Vietnam and, later, Watergate, the writers of Captain America attempted to shift Captain America from narratives steeped in American imperialism and US politics. Rather than risk alienating half of their readers due to political messages, Marvel writers shifted their characters to present a unified America. While the tenure as Nomad is short lived, the moral message Steve learns is that he can support American ideals without blindly supporting the government or political issues. In short, the writers attempted to distance Captain America from political discourse during a period where it made economic sense to do so with Captain America deciding to only support “American ideals.”¹⁸³ More importantly, the series never defines what the “American ideals” are, this act of undefining allows for the reader to define their understanding of American idealism means.

The role of the nomadic hero provides a hero without the connections to community, which forces the writers to find new methods for recurring characters and establishing new communities. Heroes are defined by the space they inhabit, Gotham plays a significant role in Batman’s identity, and various writers have constructed Gotham as an unassailable monolithic antagonist that spawns new villains for Batman to face. Similarly, Hell’s Kitchen provides the roaming ground for Daredevil, and Luke Cage strives to continually save Harlem; each of these heroes feature a specific community and recurring characters because of the space they operate

¹⁸³ Englehart, *Captain America* 179, 18.

in. *Green Lantern Green Arrow* upends this formula by featuring the two heroes as the recurring characters travelling from location to location. Centering the comic on Green Lantern and Green Arrow's friendly rivalry and political differences has the duo form new communities each issue as they come into contact with new characters, but the series still heavily relied on recurring characters. Most recurring character take the role as quasi-adversarial antagonists like Black Canary, Green Arrow's love superheroine interest that first appears as an antagonist. Similarly, *the Incredible Hulk*, a popular TV series based upon the short-lived comic of the same name, both comic and TV series presented a nomadic hero that travelled from town to town and the recurring characters are often antagonists like General Thunderbolt Ross, a man hunting the Incredible Hulk for the US military. The unconventional community of recurring characters that forms around the nomadic heroes allows for increased stakes as the comic continues and readers grow more attached to specific characters, however, both *Green Lantern Green Arrow* and *The Incredible Hulk* proved to be unreliable sellers and did not last long.¹⁸⁴

The nomadic character's new communities emphasized American ideals that bound individuals across the country and the world together. The 1990s *Nomad* series emphasized the role of the nomadic hero and American idealism, as the first issue proclaims on the cover: "he's found his own way to fight for the American dream."¹⁸⁵ By untethering Nomad from his community, the writers emphasized American ideals as ubiquitous. Similarly, DC Comics' *Green Lantern Green Arrow* articulates the desire to find the "real America," a construction that ties to the arguments of rural America as connected to the true meaning of American values and ideology. While the purpose of the storyline brings the superhero duo into a more grounded and

¹⁸⁴ *The Incredible Hulk* was cancelled after three issues, and *Green Lantern Green Arrow* was relaunched without the socially conscious themes.

¹⁸⁵ Fabian Nicieza and James Fry, "The Big Fall Apart" *Nomad 1* (New York: Marvel Comics 1990), cover.

real-world context, the series reifies notions of a universal American ideology that lies at the heart of America, and inherently contrasts it with coastal and ivory tower elites.

Despite the unreliable economic success of nomadic figures in comics, by untethering the superhero from their communities and constructing a ubiquitous America and American values, the series could peddle white liberalism as common-sense solutions to the problems facing American society. The turmoil of the war in Vietnam and the Watergate Scandal caused many young Americans to feel disillusioned with American society. These problems coupled with the emergence of the social movements and the recognition of inequality in America left the superhero in a position where they could not merely punch away the problems facing society. Instead, white writers explored how they could solve these problems facing America in their superhero comics and often articulated white liberal messages as the sensible solution to the problems facing America. While fighting crime as Nomad, Steve Rogers realizes that he can operate as Captain America by fighting for American values, and remain apolitical, but inherent in Steve Rogers' superhero morality, as explored in earlier chapters, is white liberalism. As explored in Chapter 1, white liberals felt that color-blindness would solve the problems of racism in comics, similarly, the nomadic hero could travel from location to location finding a variety of problems facing communities across America and offer the white liberal solution to the problems of the varied communities.

Because these comics present white liberalism as the solution to problems facing a variety of communities, white liberalism becomes directly tied to American idealism and the American dream. Unsurprisingly, Steve returns to the Captain America mantle after only a handful of issues. The reasoning behind the return, that Captain America can represent American idealism rather than a particular brand of politics, signals Steve's white liberal messages as not

only apolitical but as an integral part of a “true America” and American idealism. Similarly, as Green Lantern and Green Arrow explore the countryside, they find white liberal solutions to the problems facing these various communities. Despite Green Arrow presenting a far-left messages on the nomadic journey, the series pushes against the far left, and argued against what author Denny O’Neil called an authoritarian leftist movement in the United States.¹⁸⁶ Despite the series progressive political messages, the series still presents white liberalism in the series as a common sense and apolitical message. Both Marvel and DC manufactured the nomadic identity to provide a space that could emphasize white liberalism as both apolitical and common sense, rather than an ideological framework.

While inspired by the white nomadic hero and apolitical messages, the nomadic black superhero differs from its white counterpart by exiling the black superhero to outside of the United States. By contextualizing the African American superhero outside the United States, the hero operates in locations where race no longer become the defining identity of for the hero. By shifting the defining context of African American to just American, these black superheroes provide narratives that establishes the color-blind messages of white liberalism as inherent in other societies. The Falcon travels around the globe as an American agent for S.H.I.E.L.D. and John Stewart becomes another Green Lantern of Earth.

Green Heroes on the Road and the Exile of Black Identity

Since the beginning of superhero comics, the outsider narrative has been a fixture of the genre. The first superhero, Superman, rocketed to earth from an unnamed alien planet in *Action Comics 1*. The Silver Age of Comics shifted the outsider narrative to new heroes, often humans,

¹⁸⁶ John Wells, (December 2010). "Green Lantern/Green Arrow: And Through Them Change an Industry". *Back Issue!*. TwoMorrows Publishing (45): 39–54.

exploring alien planets and interdimensional fantasy scapes. In the Silver Age narratives, comic book authors often used Earthman as a preferred nomenclature instead of American as the identity description of their superheroes. The loss of their national identity provided a greater stress upon the hero as a representative of all of Earth rather than the American identity popular in Golden Age comics. In an attempt to capitalize on the various intellectual properties, DC Comics repackaged several of their Golden Age heroes, like the Flash and Green Lantern, into new characters. The debut of these new heroes marked the beginning of the Silver Age of comics. In his debut comic, the intergalactic beings known as Guardians determine that Hal Jordan is worthy to join the Green Lantern Corp, an interplanetary police force. Rocketed from Earth, Hal travels to the planet Calor to stop a monster called the Dryg on the planet Calor.¹⁸⁷ During these encounters, both the Guardians and the Calorians refer to Hal as a “Earthman” rather than an America.

Following launch of *Green Lantern Green Arrow*, DC Comics firmly rejected the analogous storytelling of the Silver Age, especially the narratives found in Marvel Comics, to focus on the social issues facing everyday Americans. Comic book authors, Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams, attempted to highlight the hypocrisy of featuring heroes facing and solving problems around the universe while not discussing the problems in American society. In the series, O’Neil intended for Green Arrow to represent radical left-wing politics and Green Lantern to be an establishment white liberal wanting to work within the system.¹⁸⁸ The rejection of the alien other narrative comes in the comic’s first issue from numerous characters, including an elderly black man who confronts Green Lantern on a rooftop. The elderly man chastises Green

¹⁸⁷ John Broome and Gil Kane, “The Planet of Doomed Men.” *Green Lantern vol. 2. 1* (DC Comics, New York, August 1960), 19.

¹⁸⁸ Denny O’Neil and Neal Adams, *Green Lantern Green Arrow* (DC Comics, New York, 2012), xi.

Lantern, “I been readin’ about you... how you work for the blue skins. And how on a planet someplace you helped out the orange skins... And you done considerable for the purple skins! Only there’s skins you never bothered with --! The black skins! I want to know how come?!”¹⁸⁹ Green Arrow confronts Green Lantern’s superiors, the immortal Guardians, and argues “forget about chasing around the galaxy!... and remember America...” he argues, “on the streets of Memphis a good black man died... and in Los Angeles, a good white man fell.”¹⁹⁰ O’Neil and Adams call for the rejection of the allegorical stories of the galaxy in favor of addressing the numerous social issues facing America today and invoke heroic imagery of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy to make their case.

Despite the rejection of the allegorical science fiction narratives, *Green Lantern Green Arrow* used the conventional narrative template to explore various social problems as the two heroes now travelled from town to town rather than planet to planet. In their first appearance together, the two white heroes, Green Lantern and Green Arrow, argue about different political issues in the United States. While no conservative position is given, Green Lantern argues from a “traditional liberal establishment” position, and Green Arrow counters with a “radical progressivism.”¹⁹¹ In the issue, Green Arrow argues that heroes need to address the systemic issues in American culture rather than the symptomatic civil unrest. In a handful of panels, Green Lantern learns about the systemic problems facing a poor African American community, and how a greedy slumlord manipulated Green Lantern into attacking the tenants. Following the first issue, the two heroes agree to team up and travel across the country in an effort to address the “hidden moral cancer is rotting our very soul.”¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ O’Neil, 13.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., ix.

¹⁹² Ibid., 28.

However, both characters are limited by their racial positionality, which only conceptualizing racism as an individual moral failing. The moral cancer Green Arrow describes largely appears through classism, but the series addresses racism occasionally. When racism appears, it largely intersects with economic class to provide a critique of racism as limiting the capitalist opportunities of black and brown bodies. The intersection of race and class in the first issue centers on the old man's critique of Green Lantern and the slumlord's racism manifesting through his tenant practices. Certainly racism causes economic inequality for Black and Brown bodies, but like other critiques of a Marxist analysis of systemic racism, racism becomes secondary to the class and economic impact.¹⁹³ The series' focus on economic class constructs a limited understanding of racism that can only be felt by working class black and brown, when racism is felt by all racial minorities.

In the third issue, the heroes encounter the call for racial violence against black and brown bodies but find themselves arguing for nonviolence and tolerance against a violent white supremacist ideology. The issue antagonist, Joshua, argues "the course of history in this nation that the white man and the non-white man are enemies... it is a pity that we must kill--! But we have no choice-- Those of white ancestry and the others can no longer share the same land... to survive, we must make corpses of the red man... the black man... the yellow man..."¹⁹⁴ As Joshua calls for violence against black, brown, red, and yellow bodies, O'Neil and Adams position Hal as a liberal voice calling for tolerance and nonviolence in response to Joshua's violent actions.

Despite being a radical leftist, Green Arrow silently agrees with Hal's call for nonviolence, "I'm acting like a spoiled brat... socking my best friend just because he's right, and

¹⁹³ Omi, 53.

¹⁹⁴ O'Neil, 73.

i'm not man enough to admit it.”¹⁹⁵ While ironic for two superheroes to call for nonviolence, this moment reifies the white liberal position of tolerance in the wake of white supremacist violence.¹⁹⁶ Unpacking this moment further, for two white heroes to argue for nonviolence as racialized bodies are being targeted is a rather disturbing position.

The call for nonviolence becomes rooted in the belief of justice in American society, even when noting the longstanding lack of justice for racial minorities in America. In the next issue, O'Neil and Adams have the heroic duo become involved in a dispute between a Native American tribe and loggers. Surprisingly, O'Neil and Adams note the long history of violence against Native Americans and the US government frequently using the law to benefit white settlers against the pleas of Indigenous people. The dispute revolves around logging rights in the region, as one Native American argues they “wouldn't hassle the white settlers if we could have exclusive rights to the lumber” and that the treaty they signed with the US Government gives them those rights.¹⁹⁷ However, the white loggers have conveniently lost their records of the treaty, and the Native American's records were mysteriously destroyed. As the issue continues, Green Lantern repeatedly calls for nonviolent action by the Native Americans despite being constantly under threat by the loggers. The issue ends with a Guardian, often depicted as a superior being, arguing that nonviolence is the only choice to advance humanity and end petty hatreds, “sooner or later, humanity must stop hitting... killing... which lead to hatred and bloodshed--!”¹⁹⁸ In the wake of systemic violence, the writers continue to return to nonviolent messages despite superheroes often using violence to solve their problems.

¹⁹⁵ O'Neil, 72.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 72.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 84.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 103.

The series unabashedly presents the loggers as the antagonists, but the primary conflict arises between Green Lantern's desire to uphold the law and Green Arrow's desire for justice for the Native Americans. Like the previous issue, Green Lantern calls for nonviolence and belief in the law, "I've always believed that if a law isn't just, I had to do whatever possible to change it... not disobey it!"¹⁹⁹ Like in the previous issue, the writers present Green Lantern's desire to uphold the law as the correct choice. However, the series' desire to showcase nonviolence as the solution presents a fairly anticlimactic resolution as Green Lantern uses his heroic status to meet with a US congressman, who opens an investigation into the treaty dispute. Despite being targeted by loggers and mentioning the history of US broken treaties with Indigenous populations, the white liberal hope for a fair resolution relies on congress recognizing the rights of Indigenous people.

Despite the hypocritical message of nonviolent action in the superhero series, Green Arrow does complicate these conversations surrounding racism and bigotry. Following these moments of racial antagonisms, Green Arrow questions if white people will ever be free of bigotry. The series note that often racism stems from those in power and the privileged group, but returns to the construction of racism as individual prejudice when Green Arrow monologues, "maybe we'll finally know how maniacs like Joshua can come to be... how they can seize the hearts of decent people and fill them with the poison of hate... of bigotry!"²⁰⁰ This moment could easily be handwaved as another conceptualization of racism only operating as a moral failing, and Green Arrow does call on individuals to search their hearts to find what hidden biases they have. Certainly, *Green Lantern and Green Arrow* reaffirmed the authors' belief of the superiority of liberalism, but it also offered far more complicated and intersecting

¹⁹⁹ O'Neil, 92.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 73.

constructions of race and economic class than previous comics and took new steps in addressing the social failings in the United States.

Perhaps recognizing that two white men faced little threat in villain's calling for violence against racial minorities, O'Neil and Adams introduced John Stewart, a black man facing the threat of systemic racism in America. Unlike other superheroes there are numerous heroes titled Green Lantern. In the comic book, the Green Lantern Corps has an active member and a member on reserve to police each space sector.²⁰¹ If the threat is too big or if the active member is injured, the reserve Green Lantern can be called into action by the Guardians. When reserve Green Lantern Guy Gardner is injured by a runaway bus, the Guardians pick John Stewart to replace Guy. Immediately Hal Jordan questions whether John is capable of being a Green Lantern, though the Guardian believes that Hal houses some "petty bigotries" of his own.²⁰² O'Neil and Adams quickly make sure the readers know that Hal is not prejudiced but he questions John's ability due to the "size of the chip on his [John's] shoulders."²⁰³ Despite Hal's weariness of John, O'Neil conveys John's grudge as a result of the racial prejudice he faces daily. To their credit, O'Neil and Adams attempt to construct John as a black hero that recognizes the inequality in the United States.

While not directly conveyed, John's affinity for black power movements can be read in his debut in the *Green Lantern* series. When two police officers attempt to stop two black men from playing dominos and cites their need for a game permit, John intercedes on behalf of the black men. John calls out to the police officer, "maybe you oughtta check your lawbook and find

²⁰¹ Because of this, I will from now on refer to Hal Jordan and John Stewart by their given names rather than their superhero identities.

²⁰² O'Neil, 73.

²⁰³ Ibid., 275.

out if they really need a permit-- to play dominos.”²⁰⁴ Unlike Hal Jordan, John comes directly into conflict with law enforcement and recognizes their role in policing black and brown bodies in society. When Hal approaches John to discuss if he would be interested in becoming a Green Lantern, John agrees, but says, “only from now on, maybe you better call me... Black Lantern!”²⁰⁵ This moment provides a tongue in cheek comment about the trend of introducing black superheroes and making their alter ego have “Black” in the title, but it also provides important characterization for John that presents the hero as unabashedly proud of his racial identity. On the following page, John finds particular resonance with the phrase, “beware my power,” a single line of the Green Lantern oath.²⁰⁶ These moments provide characterization for the future Green Lantern, but never mention black power movements. Similar to Luke Cage becoming Power Man, the writers hint at larger sociopolitical movements, but never explicitly allow their heroes to join or directly support these controversial groups.

Despite never explicitly supporting black power movements, the series continues to build a political dichotomy that ultimately defends white liberalism. Similar to the sociopolitical conflicts between Green Lantern and Green Arrow, O’Neil positions Hal as a liberal voice of reason against John’s politics. While O’Neil entertained some of Green Arrow’s leftist views as legitimate political positions, O’Neil presents John’s views as entrenched in anger and resentment. The first mission the Guardians task Hal and John with features the two heroes defending a racist senator from assassins. During this mission, John “accidentally” misses his target and causes the racist senator to be drenched in oil. While John laughs about the events

²⁰⁴ O’Neil, 276.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 277.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 278.

after, O'Neil presents John's political views and actions as childish, and Hal chides John for his inability to set aside his views to protect the senator.

More egregious, the message of the issue presents a proto-All Lives Matter argument through Hal. While O'Neil probably wanted present John as a hero willing to set aside his differences to protect someone he hates, the issue glosses over this moral dilemma to present white liberalism demanding the victims of racism stop acting childish. John argues that the Green Lanterns should not waste time defending an abhorrently evil man, but Hal argues that every life is important. While John talks about the racism and violence African Americans face in the United States, Hal simply responds that they should protect everybody. The moral dilemma of a superhero defending a villain is not a new story, but it takes a traumatic role in this issue when the black hero is admonished for not wanting to protect the racist. While the storyline paints the heroes into a corner that demands victims of racial prejudice defend racists in a moral high ground argument, O'Neil resolves this tension through a twist: the senator planned fake assassination attempts to blame black power movements and push for his upcoming presidential campaign. The twist marks *Green Lantern Green Arrow's* movement away from the political messages surrounding criminal justice that were featured in previous issues to provide a quick wrap up and introduce a black superhero.

The removal of political messages from *Green Lantern Green Arrow* means that Hal and John never directly come to terms with their political differences. Unlike Green Arrow and Hal Jordan continually debating their political positions, the revamping of the series meant that John Stewart's message of black love, black power, and potential black radicalism just disappear from the comic. O'Neil and Adams created a character with an affinity for black radical movements, but never explored them further. After becoming a Green Lantern, John Stewart mostly

disappears from the American context O'Neil and Adams wanted to explore during their run on the series. When John Stewart returned to comics, he often travelled with other Green Lanterns in contexts where racial identity did not exist.

In an attempt to expand their racial diversity, DC Comics would focus on John Stewart as the primary Green Lantern in the 1980s series. While the series brought more focus onto John Stewart, the series also shifted towards an ensemble cast and retitled the series to *Green Lantern Corps* with *issue 201*. This shift brought in several alien Green Lanterns as supporting characters, providing John and Hal with a bevy of alien perspectives. While Hal's *Green Lantern* series had explored space, most of his exploits were on Earth and interact with different people, in particular Carol Ferris and Tom "Pie Face" Kalmaku. In the *Green Lantern Corps*, John interacts with his love interest Katma Tui and Kilowag, an alien with an affinity for socialism. This new cast only knows of John Stewart as an Earthman, an identity that does not recognize racial difference and present John as a representative of all of humanity.

The shift towards universe defending heroes provides a step forward for the presentation of black identities in the same context as white heroes, but it also allows for DC to curtail any discussion of John's racial identity. By featuring a diverse cast of aliens, the narrative could present a united American identity inherent in white liberal positionality. Despite the intergalactic focus, the series still manages to explore national identities. Following the destruction of Kilowog's home planet, the Green Lantern looks for a new home on Earth during the storyline "Red Lantern." During this story, the Green Lanterns are exiled from America due to a congressional law and has the Green Lantern team fight against the Soviet Union. The storyline exiles John Stewart and other Green Lanterns from America, but also emphasizes John's national identity as American when battling Soviet superheroes. The emphasis of John's

national identity means he operates as an American hero, but it also removes any potential for an African American context.

The Green Lantern Corps minimizes racial identity and heavily emphasize the identities that both Hal and John share. The Red Lantern storyline unites Hal and John through their national identity, but most storylines in *Green Lantern Corps* emphasize their shared humanity as Earthmen. During one moment, both Hal and John decide to change their costumes to differentiate their identities as they contend “we felt, since the people of Earth aren’t used to telling Green Lanterns apart, we ought to show our individualities more!”²⁰⁷ This moment provides a tongue in cheek response that allows the artists to update the designs of each heroes’ suit, but the message still ties to the white liberal color-blind arguments surrounding the racial difference, namely that only racists recognize racial differences. The series underlines this point through the alien characters that accompany Hal and John when they agree that they had difficulty telling the two humans apart without the suit change. The writers use this alien perspective to reinforce white liberal messages as universal truths.

By emphasizing color-blindness, race only becomes emphasized when being spouted by a racist character. During the Green Lantern centric event comic, *Millennium*, a South African racist becomes a key supporting character. Two immortal aliens, a Guardian and Zamoran, attempt to evolve a dozen humans to become immortal protectors of the universe known as “New Guardians.” While the comic primarily concerned Green Lantern storylines, the series saw almost all major superheroes involved during its eight-issue run. One of the people selected to become a New Guardian is Janwilliam Kroef, a racist leader in apartheid South Africa. While numerous people with different identities from around the globe are selected, Kroef’s two panel

²⁰⁷ Steve Englehart and Joe Staton. “Setting Up Shop” *Green Lantern Corps* 201 (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 9.

introduction has the would be hero says, “the world needs a demonstration that any group of people needs the white man to run them!”²⁰⁸ Kroef provides a source of friction for the globe spanning New Guardians, and eventually quits before ascending to his role as a Guardian, but he is the only character to recognize racial identity. This narrative reinforces the color-blind argument that only racists recognize racial diversity. Furthermore, other teammates from around the globe argue that a universal understanding of white liberalism. When Kroef quits due to the presence of other races in the group in *Millennium 6*, a chosen Takeo, argues that they are “his kind we’re working against.” But Takeo is shouted down by the other chosen and Xiang Po argues, “we’re not working against anything Takeo! We’re working for... the entire human race!”²⁰⁹ This moment continues to be built on the white liberal arguments of tolerance, that you can merely ignore the racists and continue to work for the benefit of all people. Worse, the authors fail to recognize that Kroef’s racist agenda is incompatible with the New Guardian’s desire to protect all people of Earth as he actively targets people of color.

While the *Millennium* event takes place largely on Earth, the shift of the Green Lantern narrative to off world adventures allows for the narrative to present humanity as a singular identity. John’s tenure off world means he no longer interacts regularly with humans, and instead his personal relationships mostly take place with the Green Lanterns on his team which include the aliens Kilowag, Katma Tui, Salaak, Ch’p, Arisa, and Hal. This shift presents Hal and John as both humans rather than African American and Caucasian individuals.

During this tenure, John’s love interest becomes the Green Lantern Katma Tui, of the planet Korgur. While Hal Jordan originally dated Carol Ferris and continually returning to earth, John’s travels the universe with Katma rather than returning to earth. Admittedly, during this

²⁰⁸ Steve Englehart and Joe Staton “Under” *Millennium 2* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 18.

²⁰⁹ Steve Englehart and Joe Staton “Out” *Millennium 6* (New York: DC Comics, 1988), 17.

time period Hal falls in love with Arisa, the series still uses the alien love interest to emphasize both Hal and John as humans without ties to their racial identities. Over the course of the Green Lantern Corp, John and Katma begin dating, fall in love, and are married in *Green Lantern Corps* 212. John's wedding marks one of the few times a black man interacts with John in *Green Lantern Corps* and the entire moment lasts a panel.

One of the few other black characters to appear regularly in the comic is Tawny Young, a reporter and mild nuisance towards the Green Lanterns. As a reporter, Tawny often questions the motives of the Green Lanterns, and operates as a dogged reporter. However, Tawny's role as a minor annoyance does not provide much characterization or add racial dynamics to series. In this sense, Tawny provides some helpful representation and shows that DC was willing to move forward with characters that just happen to be black, but they still insisted on minimizing racial identity and discussing race with black characters directly.

The various Green Lantern series, from just *Green Lantern* to *Green Lantern Green Arrow* to *Green Lantern Corp*, provided important growth for comics as a medium. Under Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams, the series attempted to address a variety of social issues affecting America. While this direct approach proved to be unsuccessful with general audiences, the introduction of John Stewart provided DC with one of their first black superheroes. While the series limited John's role, often only appearing as a secondary character, he took on a greater role as the series became focused on an ensemble cast of Green Lanterns in *Green Lantern Corp*. Unfortunately, *Green Lantern Corp* minimized John's racial identity by emphasizing his identity as a human to provide color-blind arguments about racial identity.

The Falcon and Rewriting History of White Liberalism

Introduced in 1969, the Falcon was one of Marvel's first African American superheroes, and shifted away, somewhat, from the alien and inhuman white liberalism tales featured in early Stan Lee comics. As the Falcon, Sam Wilson offered a stepping stone between the inhuman allegorical marginalization narratives and the eventual exploration of black communities in comics. In his debut story arc, *Captain America 117 to 119*, Stan Lee heavily emphasized the same narrative themes found in his Fantastic Four narratives including an emphasis on a universal humanity. Yet, because the Falcon debuted in *Captain America*, which often melded the genre of superhero and international spy, his themes became more grounded in the exploration of racialized difference while fighting alongside the representation of American idealism, power, and influence.

Sam Wilson's debut narrative superficially counters colonialism and the white savior narrative, by focusing on Sam's heroism rather than Captain America. *Captain America 117*, "The Coming of the Falcon," opens with Captain America exiled to a small hidden island in the tropics. Like other white savior narratives found in comics, Captain America discovers the local population has been enslaved, in this instance by a Nazi cabal known as the Exiles. After a brief fight, Sam Wilson rescues Captain America from the Exiles and explains how he has been fighting the exiles ever since he arrived on the island. On the surface, Sam Wilson offers a counter narrative to the white savior story presented in other comics as a black man openly resisting the colonial forces of the Cabal. Due to a rather contrived reason of being stuck in another person's body, Captain America tells Sam that he will have to fight against the Exiles. The ensuing battle orients Sam as site of resistance to the Nazi cabal and European colonial forces.

However, the resistance to European colonialism hinges upon Sam accepting the American imperialism and inscribes a white liberal political ideology onto Sam's identity. Upon returning to the local's village, Sam admits, "I've been trying to organize them... band them together and get them to fight for the freedom that they've lost! But, it's an up-hill job!"²¹⁰ Sam needs Captain America to help organize the villagers to fight the Nazi regime. Captain America argues that Sam's failings are not due to himself, but his need to embrace a "gimmick." The call for this "gimmick" forces Sam to assimilate himself with the white American ideology represented by Captain America. As Sam laughs at the idea of becoming a "costumed clown," Captain America offers to "show him how" and "slowly convinces his attentive companion."²¹¹ These moments of training feature Captain America literally orienting and shaping Sam's body to resist Nazi colonialism. When Sam and the villagers rise up against Nazi colonial forces, they are given direction by Captain America and only with the help of the literal embodiment of American idealism can they resist.

This resistance requires Sam to discard his own identity and fully embrace the role of superhero. Captain America even argues, "forget Sam Wilson! You're the Falcon now!"²¹² In this moment, Sam shifts from a young man from Harlem to a successfully assimilated hero that rises against the enemies of American values. While a young man in Harlem, Sam spent his free time raising pigeons and had "biggest pigeon coop on any rooftop in Harlem."²¹³ As Sam joins Captain America, he discards his history with pigeons, commonly referred to as rats with wings, and adopts the moniker Falcon, rising in status and power. Certainly, this moment of assimilation

²¹⁰ Stan Lee and Gene Colon. "The Falcon Fights On!" *Captain America 118*. (Marvel Comics, New York, October 1969), 17.

²¹¹ Ibid., 20.

²¹² Ibid., 7.

²¹³ Stan Lee and Gene Colon, "The Coming of... The Falcon!" *Captain America 117* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1969), 17.

provides an imperialist message about the need for American interventionism in small developing nation states, but it also pushes for the Harlem-born Sam Wilson to adopt Captain America's values rather than his own.

While Sam fully embraces Captain America's ideology, his African American identity holds no context on the island. Sam talks about his life in Harlem, but Captain America is the only character with any knowledge of what Harlem means. The other characters featured in the issue are literal Nazis and local villagers, who have never left the island. But both villains and villagers provide the same purpose, they unite Captain America and the Falcon as Americans. Because identity is not only internal but built upon context, Sam Wilson's experiences as a marginalized identity in an American context never occurs. Despite facing a racist fascist enemy, no one discusses Sam's African American identity. Instead, Captain America asks Sam to discard his own identity and become the Falcon.

Despite the call to discard his identity, the Falcon's dialogue still harbors the writer's conscious effort to explore the difference of identity. When the Red Skull captures Sam's falcon, Redwing, the storyline offers a narrative that channels hundreds of years of slavery: "Freedom is only for the one who rules! All others must be slaves!"²¹⁴ This moment offers the call of freedom for African Americans, but the only method to free Redwing and find freedom for the Falcon and his bird is to harbor Captain America's liberalism. This seems to return to long held belief by White liberals that repeatedly blame African Americans for their "inability" to let go of past atrocities. However, the Falcon does heed Captain America's advice and free Redwing.

²¹⁴ Stan Lee and Gene Colon. "Now Falls the Skull!" *Captain America* 119. (Marvel Comics, New York, November 1969), 8.

The call for Falcon to discard his identity comes as Captain America and Falcon square off against the Red Skull. With the village returned to its “happy and peaceful” beginnings, Captain America and the Falcon are teleported by the Cosmic Cube from the island to fight the Red Skull. To emphasize the utopian potential of Captain America’s rhetoric, Lee has the Red Skull attempt to build a dystopian “Nazi Dream.” The Red Skull shouts, “Tyranny yet shall conquer the globe... the tyranny of the Red Skull!”²¹⁵ In opposition to the Red Skull’s call for Aryan white supremacy, the heroes argue that their separate identities do not matter. Against this tyranny, the Falcon vows to fight at the side of Captain America, essentially arguing that they are stronger together than separate. As they argue for this integration, Captain America explains that “neither my identity or yours has any meaning now! All that matters is beating the Red Skull!”²¹⁶ Despite being one of the first African American superheroes, the Falcon is placed in a setting that strategically removes the black portion of his black American identity.

Admittedly, this reading of one of the first black superheroes is rather unforgiving, but the purpose of Sam Wilson is not to celebrate the black community or black identity but to provide black disparagement and ask why the black community does not assimilate to white American values.²¹⁷ Upon returning to Harlem after their island adventure, Captain America seeks out the Falcon a few issues later. After seeking out the Falcon, Captain America learns Wilson has been completely ostracized by the people of Harlem. The white comic book writers chose to not only remove Sam from his black community but to have the black community exile the black superhero.

²¹⁵ Lee, *Captain America* 119, 4.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

²¹⁷ This is not to say that Stan Lee was racist, in fact Lee was an outspoken critic of racism. However, America is founded upon white supremacy and by embracing Captain America as superior, it hints at a white supremacist reading.

Sam Wilson's exile is built upon the popular white liberal comparison of racism from black communities towards white people as equal to the racism black communities experience. In *Captain America 126*, the Falcon faces the Diamond Heads, a villainous gang that operates in Harlem. When the Falcon appries Captain America of the gang's work to delegitimize his superheroic work, he describes the Diamond Heads as a "black version of the Klan! All they preach is hate whitey!"²¹⁸ It's not surprising that a comic book would use the Klan's terrorism as a marker to fight against, but his description hinges upon the white liberal comparison of racism against whites as a key component of black communities that push against white color-blind rhetoric and declares racism is merely prejudice and violence. Sam also notes "they could set our progress back a 100 years."²¹⁹ The purpose of this statement once again ties to Sam's adoption of white liberalism while in America, and his wholehearted belief that the black community needs to be self-policed.

Interestingly, the head of the Diamond Head Gang is revealed to be a white man that desired to stoke racial tension and cause a race war. While somewhat relieving that Marvel decided to not make the bad guys a black panther organization in all but name, the revelation still offers a troubling reading of black identity and the relationship between black and white communities. Perhaps worst, Diamond Heads racial revelation delegitimize the criticisms black communities held of white American, instead handwaving this criticism away as merely racists trying to divide Americans on racial lines.

Exiled from Harlem, the Falcon and Captain America can defeat the Diamond Head Gang, and the Falcon agrees to join Captain America at S.H.I.E.L.D., a superhuman spy

²¹⁸ Stan Lee and Gene Colon. "The Fate of... The Falcon." *Captain America 126* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1970), 7.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

organization. When not advocating white liberal talking points, the black community disappears, and the series shifts towards a human and other dichotomy. One of Sam's first stories involves Falcon and Captain America travelling to the underground nation of Mole Men. Trapped beneath the surface, the narrative shifts away from any discussion of actual race to instead discuss the racial differences of humanity and the Mole Men. Like the island, the interaction with the Mole Men allows for Falcon and Captain America to be constructed as a unified racial identity of humans rather than their actual racial identity.

This is not to say that the Falcon should not be praised as an important step forward in comic books. While most black characters in comics were ghettoized and gang related, the Falcon originally was a social worker that desired to help black children. As a hero, the Falcon provided an important first step for the depiction of African American identity in comics. In response to the revelation of the Watergate Tapes, the writers had Captain America resign from superheroics when Captain America discovers that the in-universe President is involved in a criminal conspiracy. Following Captain America's resignation, the Falcon briefly stars as the primary superhero in *Captain America and the Falcon*.

Unfortunately, Marvel seemed unable to understand how to present Sam Wilson outside of the ghettoization of black comic book characters. In *Captain America 186*, Marvel writer Steve Englehart rewrote the Falcon origin and removed the character's history as a social worker and presented the Falcon as a minion of the Red Skull. If the Falcon partnered with a Nazi was not bad enough, Englehart's reworking of the Falcon's origin presents the hero as a gang leader and pimp known as Snap Wilson. The uninspired revelation of Sam's secret history even features Snap Wilson in two different large purple zoot suits.²²⁰ Perhaps most insulting, is that the Red

²²⁰ Steve Englehart and Frank Robbins. "Mind Cage" *Captain America 186* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1975), 5.

Skull reveals he rewrote Sam's history with the Cosmic Cube, a Deus Ex Machina device that allows the wielder to control reality. In other words, Sam's superheroic disposition was only because his entire personality was completely rewritten by the Red Skull, "I changed almost everything about him!"²²¹ But even in rewriting Sam's history, the series still makes white liberalism the hero as Red Skull argues, "I knew you well, Captain America! I knew exactly what kind of man would most appeal to your sniveling liberalism: -- an upright, cheerful Negro, with a love for the same 'brotherhood' you cherish!"²²²

This rewriting of the Falcon once again ties to the construction of white liberalism as the heroic trait in comic books. Ironically, the Red Skull's arguments against Captain America's understanding of race and liberalism comes not from the left but from the most prominent Nazi in comic books. This moment positions Captain America's liberalism as a heroic trait fighting against the Red Skull's National Socialism, but the series' presenting of liberalism as heroic comes entirely at the expense of its black star and leaves Sam as little more than a horrific creation of the Red Skull.

Sam Wilson operates as a superhero, but one that has been entirely oriented by white liberalism. Prior to the Red Skull's revelation, Sam found himself directionless and through Captain America, he became oriented towards the white liberal embodiment of heroism found in Captain America's ideology. Yet, the Red Skull literally rewriting Sam's history also oriented the character toward accepting Captain America's white liberal ideology. Stepping back from the narrative, a meta-analysis of the series provides a troubling tale of how white liberalism often rewrites the history of black identity to establish liberalism as the heroic force in society at the expense of the black and brown bodies and their sacrifices.

²²¹ Englehart, *Captain America* 186, 9.

²²² *Ibid.*, 8.

Black Characters in White Spaces

While John Stewart and the Falcon provided new black superheroes, Marvel also introduced supporting characters in white superhero books. These characters were not superheroes, but instead operated as props to provide emotional stakes for the heroes to overcome. Like the use of damsels in distress, these black supporting characters were threatened, beaten, and abused for the white hero to become emotionally invested in the fight. In this subsection, I examine two black supporting characters introduced, Bill Foster and James Rhodes. Unlike other heroes featured, Bill Foster and James Rhodes operate outside of black communities, but embedded in white dominant communities. Briefly explored in this section, these two supporting characters turned superheroes operate outside of a black community context. These two characters would become central to their comic series, and eventually develop into superheroes. However, their primary use continues to be emotional props that white heroes must defend.

One of Marvel's first black characters, Gabriel "Gabe" Jones paved the way for many black characters that would follow. A soldier in the Howling Commandos, Gabriel debuted in *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos 1* in 1963. With Jones, Marvel Comics rewrote their WWII history with the introduction of Gabriel, an African American soldier and later S.H.I.E.L.D. spy. The Howling Commandos, special forces unit active during Marvel's version of WWII, presented the desegregation of the military half a decade before it occurred in 1948. While Gabriel Jones never became a superhero, he served the same purpose as many of Marvel's black superheroes during the 1960s and 1970s, Gabriel Jones allowed Marvel to present a unified America. By having Jones fight in Nazi occupied Europe and Imperial Japan, Marvel never had to wrestle with the uncomfortable reality of how Jones would still need to sit on the back of a bus

in 1942 America. Authors carefully situated Jones abroad, and Marvel constructed a post-racial WWII America that easily meshed with a 1960s white liberalism. Authors used Gabriel Jones to rewrite the history of WWII and offered an inclusive, though historically inaccurate depiction that allowed for Gabriel Jones to become one of Marvel's early black characters on par with heroes like Captain America. Created by Stan Lee, Gabriel Jones became one of the first black comic book characters to appear in a major publication. However, because Gabriel was one of the first black characters to appear in comics, he was accidentally colored in the first issue.²²³ Following this coloring mistake, Lee included notes for each issue to mark that Gabriel Jones was African American.

But, like the superheroes featured in this chapter, Gabriel Jones exists almost exclusively on the European theater of WWII. As a secondary character, Jones and other racial minorities featured like Jim Morita. While Green Lantern and the Falcon became fixated on discussing white liberalism, *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos* became celebrated for its open discussion of war and the questions surrounding morality in combat. As a supporting character, Gabriel Jones provided powerful imagery of a black soldier fighting alongside white soldiers during WWII.

Gabriel's role as a soldier provided important imagery for young black boys, but the character's personal life provided social commentary when Jones began dating Peggy Carter, a white woman and former love interest of Captain America. Because *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos* was set during WWII, Marvel felt they could feature popular characters as secondary and tertiary characters in their superhero series. At some point between the end of WWII and Captain America being thawed by the Avengers in the present, Gabriel Jones joins

²²³ Mark Alexander, "Wah-Hoo!! Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos" *Jack Kirby Collector* 24 (April 1999). Online: <http://www.twomorrows.com/kirby/articles/24fury.html>

S.H.I.E.L.D. and starts dating Peggy Carter. The romantic relationship between Carter and Jones becomes a focal point for the Red Skull. Written less than a decade after *Loving v. Virginia*, the relationship between Gabriel and Peggy presents miscegenation laws as an extension of the Nazism, as Jones defiantly says, “listen Skull, if your gonna play that master race game, you can play it with me.”²²⁴ By featuring the most vile villain in the Marvel Universe as attacking Peggy simply for dating a black man, the comic provides a clear morality tale embedded within it surrounding miscegenation.

Introduced in *Avengers* 32, Bill Foster joins Hank Pym’s team in an effort to return Hank to his normal size after the hero becomes trapped at ten feet tall. Appearing in 1966, Bill offers one of the first African American superheroes to appear in comics and provides an important step forward for the depiction of black people in superhero comics. Unlike superheroes that would appear later, Bill provides a nuanced depiction of an African American in comics that does not rely on stereotypical ghettoization. While Bill provides a more nuanced depiction of African Americans, his primary purpose still provides a narrative of a united American identity.

In *Avengers* 32, Hank Pym and the other Avengers learn about the issues of racism in their own community when Bill is viciously attacked by a gang known as the Sons of the Serpents.²²⁵ The Sons of the Serpent are violent white supremacists that demand the Avengers protect white America from racial minorities. While the Sons of the Serpent highlight the racism faced by black men and women in the 1960s, they also allow the writers to argue for monolithic American values and present America as founded on racial acceptance. Hank argues that the

²²⁴ Steve Englehart and Frank Robbins, “Scream the Scarlet Skull!” *Captain America* 185 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1975), 13.

²²⁵ Stan Lee and Don Heck, “The Sign of the Serpent!” *Avengers vol. 1* 32 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1966), 11.

Sons of the Serpent are “an insult to the men who made this nation great!”²²⁶ During an announcement where the Avengers must support the Serpents or Captain America will die, Hank Pym denounces the Serpents by arguing American morality, “our nation was built on freedom, not tyranny! Brotherly love-- not hatred! Justice for all-- not bigotry!”²²⁷ Through the Avengers, the writers argue that the Sons of the Serpent and white nationalism runs counter to the American values.

While the Avengers vow to fight the Serpents, Captain America also argues that they should respect the rule of law and commit to nonviolent action. During a press conference following the serpents attempted assassination of General Chen, the superheroes argue the problem with the Sons of the Serpents is not their racism or white supremacy, but “the Sons of the Serpent will be punished by the very laws they’re trying to take into their own hands.”²²⁸ Despite superheroes being vigilantes, the Avengers argue that upholding law and order as the most important thing a person can do, rather than attempting to combat the racism the serpents espouse. In *issue 33*, the series makes clear that hearing the Serpent’s racism is a minor price to pay to live in a free society and presses upon the reader the importance of freedom of speech.²²⁹

However, rather than come to terms with the notion of white supremacy as a factor rooted in the United States, the Avengers argues that racism continues to be an outside force meant to weak US democracy. In a twist, the Avengers unmask the leader of the Sons of the Serpent and discover that General Chen is the leader of the Serpents. The twist of Chen as the leader of the

²²⁶ Lee, *Avengers 32*, 13.

²²⁷ Stan Lee and Don Heck. “To Smash A Serpent!” *Avengers vol. 1 33* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1966), 12.

²²⁸ Lee, *Avengers 32*, 16.

²²⁹ Lee, *Avengers 33*, 6.

Serpents presents the narrative of racism as an outside force that attempts to divide Americans so other nations could divide and conquer America.

While the series denounces racism and bigotry, Bill Foster's debut story also infantilizes racial minorities. When Bill discovers that the Avengers are going to support the Serpents, a ruse to save Captain America and capture the Supreme Serpent, Hank argues that Bill does not understand the larger picture. Rather than tell Bill their plan, Hank tells the other Avengers that this is ultimately good for Bill.²³⁰ Interestingly, the entire stakes presented in the two issues argues that if the Avengers support the Serpents, a majority of Americans will follow suit. Through Hank, the authors argue that their plan will ultimately provide the best outcome for racial minorities, but Hank completely ignores the stakes of supporting the serpents to argue for this ruse. Ultimately, the narrative infantilizes Bill Foster and other racial minorities to argue that he does not understand what is good for him and presents his perspective as limited compared to the superhero team.

As Bill continues to appear as a secondary character in the Avengers, his role changes from scientist to superhero. Eventually, Bill becomes the superhero Black Goliath. While the series changes Bill's role, the purpose of Bill does not change. Bill continues to be solely surrounded by white superheroes and operate as a token character that allows for the superhero team to appear as inclusive. While denouncing racism and bigotry was important when the character first appeared, he continued to operate as a straw man argument for the importance of white liberalism in American society.

Like Bill Foster, James Rhodes was introduced in *Iron Man* to provide racial diversity to an all-white cast. While the authors had Bill Foster join the Avengers in their time of need, the

²³⁰ Lee, *Avengers* 33, 6.

authors of Iron Man, David Michelinie and Bob Layton, insert James “Rhodey” Rhodes into Iron Man’s history. Introduced in *Iron Man 118*, Rhodey is only shown as Tony hops onto a helicopter. In *Iron Man 120*, Rhodey explains his history with Tony Stark, “I’ve been with the man ever since ‘Nam, and I think I know him as well as anyone.”²³¹ Over the course of the issue, the writers emphasize that Tony Stark lacks friends, with Rhodey even noting comment to another character, “right about now a friend like you is just what he nee...” before being interrupted.²³²

The hasty introduction aside, James Rhodes proves to be a positive step in representation as Iron Man does not fall into the tired trapping of white liberalism. Like Bill Foster, Rhodes operates in a space where he is the only person of color on the page, but the *Iron Man* does not use Rhodes as a prop to discuss color-blindness. Interestingly, Rhodes appears at the start of the celebrated era of Iron Man, when the authors began to openly discuss social issues. Rhodes’ first speaking appearance occurs in *Iron Man 120*, the first issue of the popular *Demon in a Bottle* story arc where Tony Stark struggles with alcoholism.

However, Rhodes marks the new trend in comics, using black characters to provide emotional weight for white characters. Similar to the use of women as props for male superheroes, black characters have been used and discarded for white characters to have emotional growth. Rhodey briefly becomes Iron Man following Tony’s relapse into alcoholism. During this stint, Denny O’Neil fleshed out Rhodey’s background and introduced his mother, Roberta Rhodes. However, the introduction of Roberta serves to expand Tony’s struggle with alcoholism rather than James Rhodes’s history.

²³¹ David Michelinie, Bob Layton, and John Romita Jr. “The Old Man and the Sea Prince” *Iron Man 120* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1979), 14.

²³² *Ibid.*, 14.

Since his introduction, Rhodes has primarily been used to allow for Tony Stark and other white characters to grow. Following Rhodey's death in the 2016 event series, *Civil War II* several fans argued that Rhodey and other characters of color were often killed or abused for white characters to feel emotions. A review of Civil War II wrote that the series treated the longstanding comic book character as an object, a catalyst for white heroes to fight one another. Marvel executive editor Tom Brevoort even acknowledged this long standing use of black heroes as objects while attempting to argue against this sentiment and argues, "it seems like it's always the black hero who dies in these kind of stories, but at least in this instance I feel like we stand on decent ground saying if there had to be a death, it should be Rhodey because of his relationship with the characters, not because of the color of his skin or his lack of prominence in the Marvel Universe."²³³

While Rhodes would develop in the 1990s into his own superhero, War Machine, he presents a new and disturbing racism found in comics: the use of the black body as a tool to be abused and discarded for white heroes to have emotional stakes. This trend appeared in the popular Marvel movie, *Captain America: Civil War*, as Rhodey is accidentally shot out of the sky by the Vision and becomes paralyzed. This moment allows for Tony Stark to witness the turmoil the superhero civil war has caused, but one of the three black superheroes introduced during this period must be the victim.

²³³ Charles Pulliam-Moore "Stop Killing Off Characters of Color to Give White Characters Something to Feel" *Splinter News*, June 08, 2016. Online: <https://splinternews.com/stop-killing-off-characters-of-color-to-give-white-char-1793857372>

Conclusion

Presented outside of black communities and the United States, John Stewart and Falcon present the white liberalism inherent in the superhero narrative as universal and inherent attributes found in all societies. Furthermore, both superheroes offer narratives of black identity being removed displaced with only racist characters recognizing racial identity in society. These aspects create the appearance of white liberalism as a powerful force that can solve the larger societal problems in America. The exiling of black characters from black communities continued with the introduction of supporting figures, Bill Foster and James Rhodes. While these two would eventually develop into black superheroes later, they primarily operate as props for white characters to appear more heroic. Both the writers use Bill Foster and James Rhodes to provide emotional stakes for their superheroes at the expense of their black characters.

Community context provides important details surrounding the superhero and their world views. By effectively distancing African American superheroes from black communities, white authors created a space where they would not need to discuss race except for an issue or key two. This created space for post-racial messages, a key hope of white liberalism and presents the recognition of racial difference as racism. White liberalism's internal logic effectively argues "the only people that care about race are racists," but this logic fails to grasp that the United States was founded on an axis of white supremacy and that racial difference continues to be a key context of social injustice and these injustices cannot be resolved until society recognizes different racial experiences.

Chapter 4:

Melting Pot Identities: African Immigration and American Unity

Since her debut, Wonder Woman has long been considered the feminist superheroine. Perhaps expecting feminist inclusivity, in 1973 DC Comics used Wonder Woman to introduce the first Black superheroine for a major comic publisher, Nubia. Originally an antagonist, Nubia challenges Wonder Woman to a trial by combat and defeats the feminist icon. Rather than killing Wonder Woman, Nubia removes her helm and introduces herself as the “Wonder Woman of the Floating Island.”²³⁴ The first two issues hint that Nubia is more than she seems as she not only bests Wonder Woman in combat, but is Diana’s moral equal and even hints at Wonder Woman’s feminist beginnings when she declares that “no man will ever own Nubia!” when two men try to fight for her hand in marriage.²³⁵ In an attempt to entice readers about Nubia’s origin, Queen Hippolyta, Wonder Woman’s mother, hints at Nubia’s secret origin. DC writers expanded upon Nubia’s backstory throughout the first three issues she appears before revealing that Nubia was Wonder Woman’s long-lost twin sister.

The clumsy reveal highlights the white liberalism present in popular comics during this era and the misplaced hope for color-blindness to solve racial tension. The racial tension becomes resolved through the argument of Nubia and Wonder Woman as a singular family despite different racial identities.²³⁶ Hippolyta reveals that she created two clay babies, one made of light clay and the other dark, and the gods gave life to both. However, Mars, the god of war, abducted the infant Nubia and turned her into Wonder Woman’s rival. Unsurprisingly, Wonder

²³⁴ Robert Kanigher and Don Heck, “The Second Life of the Original Wonder Woman” *Wonder Woman* 204 (New York: DC Comics, 1973), 15.

²³⁵ Robert Kanigher and Don Heck, “The Mystery of Nubia” *Wonder Woman* 205 (New York: DC Comics, 1973), 5.

²³⁶ Decades later, numerous news outlets proclaimed the end of race due to two biracial twins, Millie and Marcia Biggs, because one appeared white and the other Black.

Wonder Woman manages to save her sister through their similarities, and Nubia vows to follow Wonder Woman's example and live a life of peace. Ostensibly the storyline offers an examination of how Wonder Woman and Nubia are similar despite their racial differences, a thread that a reader can extend to all people in the world.

Despite the feel-good message of a harmonious humanity, Nubia's introduction hinges upon the tired tropes of Africa in relation to the United States. In *Black Women in Sequence*, Deborah Whaley notes that Nubia provides a patchwork representation of Africa. Like Wonder Woman, Nubia provides an immigration narrative by travelling from a mythological island to the real world. Unlike Wonder Woman, Nubia signifies the complicated presentation of different cultures on the African continent mashed together to represent an African identity. William Moulton Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman, rooted his superheroine in Greek mythology, but Nubia derives her identity from miscellany of cultures in or near Africa. The name Nubia comes from Egypt, her mythology ties to the Middle East, and she protects all of Africa.²³⁷ The homogenization of Africa as a singular culture is far from new, but the presentation of Black superheroes from Africa provides a new context that positions the Black immigrant superhero's African identity as an expendable flair for the character to become Americanized.

In this chapter, I argue that the Black immigrant superhero provides a compelling narrative built upon a dispensable African identity, rooted on exoticizing African women, and positioning US hegemony as a necessary guidance for Black people. I return to Black Panther and Storm as pivotal Black immigrant superheroes, both of whom, operate in different and fascinating ways to perpetuate US imperialism as natural and necessary.²³⁸ I extend this analysis

²³⁷ Deborah Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence Re-inking Comics, Graphic Novels and Anime*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 99.

²³⁸ As other scholars have repeatedly explored, the portrayal of a naturalism surrounding US imperialism often finds its roots in liberalism. For more information see: Shelley Streeby,

through the incorporation of Black immigrant superheroes like Brother Voodoo, Nubia, and Vixen. Like the exiled African American superhero, the Black immigrant superhero provides a united conception of American values, but also minimizes the trauma of Black bodies caused by the United States. The minimization of trauma creates superheroes disconnected from slavery, Jim Crow, and radical Black political movements grown in opposition to white supremacist policies. When these traumas do enter the conversation, it becomes a force to be overcome or minimizes the legacy of US white supremacist policy, often both. These superheroes do become politically active and provide powerful political imagery, often taking center stage to discuss racism, colonialism, and white supremacy by creating context devoid of US historical participation.

African Landscapes and Americanization

In American literature, Africa exists as a contradictory landscape, built upon a faulty geography and homogenous cultural creations. In *Black Women in Sequence*, Deborah Whaley argues that the Black superheroine became a signifier for Africa. Extending upon Whaley's argument, the Black superhero operates not just as signifier of Africa and in one instance Haiti, but also a signifier of a whitewashed America. The popular media depiction of Africa often features a homogenous African depiction of jungles and tribal people in loincloths. Rooted in a colonial perspective, writers often depict Africans in need of help from the white savior like the serialized dime novel hero Allan Quatermain or the dour Charles Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. Despite the difference of literary pedigree, both construct a stereotypical and contradictory Africa that praises colonialism as both helpful and destructive.

American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture. University of California Press: Oakland: 2002.

In a rare moment of progressivism, the African superheroes featured in DC and Marvel Comics often reject colonialism in their immigration narratives. Unlike other superhero groups, the immigrant superheroes explored in this chapter operate in rather unique and interesting manners in their relation to American politics. Both Storm and Black Panther becomes heavily involved in American politics and activism, but also provide a disconnect from the narratives of Slavery and Jim Crow. While Haitian, Brother Voodoo provides a compelling narrative that constructs his identity as an American outsider in his homeland of Haiti. Like immigrant narratives of the melting pot, these characters' birthplace identities seemingly fade away as they become more Americanized. These African superheroes builds on both the depiction of their birthplace but also through heavily contested immigration narratives.

Immigration narratives often manifest themselves in national rhetoric to argue for the inclusion of people and their assimilation to American cultural values. In *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, Lisa Lowe argues,

“the legal and political forms of the nation have required a national culture in the integration of differentiated people and social spaces that make up “America.” A national culture, broadly cast yet singularly engaging, that can inspire diverse individuals to identify with the national project.”²³⁹

Immigrant assimilation provides direct ties to the role of citizenship and inherently asks to question of what makes a good citizen. The good citizen is central to the role of the traditional superhero, though that would be somewhat discarded in the 1980s with the rise of the anti-hero narrative. By assimilating to American cultural practices, the immigrant hero proves their status as a good citizen and subsequently becomes a great superhero respected by other superheroes.

²³⁹ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.

The question of assimilation and citizenship ties to the larger national discourse, which often presents people of color as deviants, bad citizens, or denies their citizenship. For Asian Americans and LatinX identities, there continues to exist rhetoric that questions whether they are citizens. Traditionally, the denial of citizenship to African Americans came in the form of white paternal arguments depicting Black bodies as children in need of white guidance. However, the introduction of Black immigrants melds both rhetorical threads, questioning if the Black body is a citizen and if they are capable of handling the responsibilities of citizenship. Despite being American, conservatives questioned Barack Obama's citizenship through birtherism and if he was a good citizen by using faux scandals about his wardrobe (tan suits), food preferences (Dijon Mustard), or links to terrorism (terrorist fist bump). Both threads are predicated on the notion of whiteness as the key sign of citizenship.

The duality of newfound Americanization and the hero's traditional culture creates an intriguing narrative that whitewashes US history. None of the comics devolve into questions of outright racist rhetoric, but the introduction of the Black immigrant superhero inherently discusses the role of citizenship and assimilation to US culture values. Their assimilation also marks a powerful link for white liberalism's desire to ignore the trauma inflicted on Black bodies throughout US history. Black immigrant superheroes are completely removed from the traumas of Slavery, Jim Crow, and countless other traumas throughout US history. However, the purpose of these tabula rasa narratives is not to erase the trauma inflicted on the Black body, but to remove the white culpability inherent with that trauma. The writers of these immigrant narratives have no problem enslaving Black bodies and revisiting these traumas, but only when the narratives are properly distanced from white accountability.

The introduction of Black immigrant superheroes builds upon the colonial myth of the helpless savage and American mythology surrounding immigration. By far, this group provides the most eclectic group of superheroes found as some present Americans as a united identity, others highlight activist arguments, and some underscore an opposition to Africa. Despite these differences, the immigrant superhero often presents the role of a national identity as central to their heroic journey.

The history of colonialism and racism often intersects with the discussion of gender. The presentation of Africa in adventure stories is not just based on racist assumptions but heavily negotiated through gender dynamics. Often the story features a white male hero who saves a young woman of color. The exotic princess, priestess, and other roles provide a romantic tension between the white hero and the woman of color, a dynamic that relies on racial and gendered assumptions. The immigrant superhero builds upon this history while subverting it, as most of these superheroes tend to be the exoticized African women capable of saving others but still constructed through a lens of foreign sex appeal and the need of white male guidance.

Storm: Immigrant Acts, Assault, and Leadership

Introduced in 1975, Storm is, arguably, the most popular Black superhero to appear in the history of comic books. The *Uncanny X-Men* series, which featured Storm in a prominent role, was the best-selling comic book through the 1980s and early 1990s. Due to this popularity, Storm starred in a handful of solo series and been featured in almost every iteration of X-Men comics. Since her debut through the 2000s, Marvel used Storm as their prominent superheroine, even having Storm fight against DC's superheroine Wonder Woman in the industry crossover comic book, *DC vs. Marvel* in 1996. While other Black superheroes have met varying degrees of

popularity that has waxed and waned over the 50 years of Black superheroes, Storm's popularity has remained relatively constant and at the forefront of popular consciousness appearing prominently in the Fox *X-Men* film franchise and multiple television shows.

Despite her prominence as Marvel's most popular woman and Black character, Marvel rarely focuses on Storm's identity as a Black woman. While a vast majority of the comic book character discussed in this dissertation are Black men, Storm offers a unique characterization as a Black woman in comic books. As discussed in Chapter 1, Storm's gender and racial identity often becomes secondary to her mutant identity and often tertiary to her identity as an immigrant. Storm's identity undergoes rapid growth to become a staunch activist. While becoming an activist, her immigrant identity reifies the white liberal mythology surrounding the United States and immigration, while distancing Storm from race and gender activist movements.²⁴⁰

Like Luke Cage, the early appearance of Storm underscores the importance of her racial and gender identity compared to the white male members of the X-Men. In *Giant Sized X-Men 1*, writer Len Wein presents Storm as a young Kenyan woman. Having never left her village, Professor Xavier tells Storm about the prejudice she will face, "people may fear you, hate you."²⁴¹ While this conversation implies Storm will be hated for her superhuman abilities, the conversation leaves enough ambiguity for the alternative reading surrounding fear and hatred towards a powerful Black woman. This reading is reinforced as Xavier does not warn any of the Storm's teammates, all of whom are male, and most are white. *Uncanny X-Men* finds success

²⁴⁰ The longform nature of comics means that character growth is often disregarded when new writers take over, or worse, company mandated for fear that change will result in a popular character becoming unpopular and no longer financially successful. For instance, DC Comics Editorial refuses to let comic book characters get married because they feel it would limit the storytelling avenues for characters.

²⁴¹ Len Wein, "Deadly Genesis" *Giant-Sized X-Men 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1975), 9.

with its haphazard metaphor of mutant rights in moments that allow for the ambiguous insertion of racial or gender dynamics.

In Storm's introduction, the authors note the intersections of racial and gender bias against Black women in Western society. As Storm and Xavier prepare to leave her village, Xavier warns Storm that she will probably only be truly happy if she remains in her village.²⁴² Unlike the white men or two other racial minority men, Len Wein hints that Storm's racial and gender identity intersect in a unique way that will probably make her life more difficult compared to her other mutant teammates. This brief moment provides the faintest hint at how racial and gender identities affect Western society and the different misogynoir, the intersection of misogyny and racism, Black women face in the United States. But this moment disappears when placed in the larger narrative as Wein departed the series after only writing *Giant Sized X-Men 1* and other writers undercut Storm's intersectional identity to focus on characters like Nightcrawler or the Morlocks, mutants that are physically marked and discriminated against. Despite the choice to focus on Storm's mutant identity, her racial and gender identity appear in interesting and unique ways for a superhero comic.

Often Storm's racial and gender identity work as extensions of her mutant identity. Because writers construct the X-Men through their mutant powers, their identities become centered on their mutant status. However, their mutaneity often works as extensions of their overall identity. *Uncanny X-Men* often describes Storm's ability to control the weather as unnatural, awe inspiring, and exotic. The decision to present Storm's mutant abilities as strange and exotic hinges upon her identity as an African woman. Characters frequently comment that she produces an "eerie fog" and express shock as Storm's rises into the air as lightning flashes

²⁴² Wein, *Giant Sized X-Men 1*, 9.

around her. This eeriness centers on the exotic beauty narrative where Storm's powers mark her as an outsider among outsiders as various mutants display amazing abilities. Because Storm's abilities make her stand out among other mutants, *Uncanny X-Men* solidifies her exoticness through her superhero costume as she asks other X-Men why they wear restrictive clothing that she finds strange, and deliberately chooses her superhero costume to remind her and the reader of her Kenyan origin. Storm's superhero aesthetic becomes entirely defined through her identity as an exotic beauty

While Storm's superhero identity hinges upon the exotic beauty imagery, writers occasionally subvert this narrative by emphasizing her raw power and presenting her as a fear inducing superheroine. Central to the exotic beauty is the recurring narrative of a helpless foreign woman and the white savior. However, Storm's mutant powers, the ability to control the weather, also establishes Storm as a powerful mutant. When the X-Men face various anti-mutant or mutant superiority antagonists, Storm calls upon the weather to rise above her enemies and often causes her foes to cower in fear at the sight of her awe-inspiring power.

Despite the subversion of the exotic beauty narrative, Storm's narrative hinges upon a Black woman needing the guidance of white men. Often present in superhero narratives comes the powerful young superhero in need of guidance from older wiser heroes that have less innate power. In *Uncanny X-Men Vol. 2* 77, Storm's powers cause a massive flood across Africa, killing numerous animals and destroy local villages.²⁴³ The setup of this scene provides the obvious message that Storm's innate gifts require more control to not wreak devastation. The introduction of Professor Xavier at this moment reinforces Storm's need for guidance. Rhetorically, *Uncanny X-Men* provides tension between Storm and the natural world and often

²⁴³ Joe Kelley and German Garcia, "Psi-War: Storm Front Part 1" *X-Men Vol. 2* 77 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1998), 12.

presents her powers as unnatural and destructive. Through this rhetoric and storyline repetition, Storm asks for the guidance of a white American man. Because Storm proceeds to represent all of Africa, the narrative draws a comparison of Africa needing the guidance of America and the white liberal values of the superhero to truly flourish.

As an African immigrant, Marvel writers often used Storm's identity to provide narratives that articulate Western superiority compared to other nations. Outside of the stereotypical depictions of African villages as little more than small huts and African people in loincloths; popular superhero comics often depict a singular African identity. While the new roster of X-Men features characters from around the globe, a choice that offers actual diversity in a superhero comic rather than tokenism, the series presents unique national and cultural identities for Western nations and homogenizes minority superheroes. The team includes Wolverine, a Canadian mutant ; Colossus, a Siberian Soviet mutant; Sunfire, a Japanese mutant; Nightcrawler, a West German mutant; and Thunderbird, an Apache mutant.²⁴⁴ While these heroes have various identities, only Storm's becomes erased overtime to include all of Africa and this diverse team still becomes led by two white American men, Xavier and Cyclops.

After joining the team, Marvel writer Chris Claremont expanded Storm's backstory in a handful of issues depicting her life prior to meeting Xavier. While *Giant Sized X-Men* deliberately placed Storm's origin as a naive Kenyan woman that had never left her village before Xavier appeared one day, Claremont drastically expanded Storm's origin to include most of Africa.²⁴⁵ Western media's presentation of a pan-African identity is not only problematic, but rests on racist assumptions about Africa and the people who live there. In an attempt to provide a

²⁴⁴ Except for Thunderbird who is killed in an early issue.

²⁴⁵ Chris Claremont and Dave Cockrum, "Who Will Stop the Juggernaut." *Uncanny X-Men vol. 1* 102, 12.

dramatic backstory, Claremont turned Storm into a citizen of Africa. During one issue Storm learns that she was born in Harlem and moved to Egypt with her parents before being orphaned during the Suez crisis as a French jet crashed and killed her parents.²⁴⁶ Following this event, Storm travels across Africa before finding herself in the Kenyan village she was fated to meet Xavier in. Other expansions to Storm's identity would include her role as a pickpocket in Egypt, encountering a young Black Panther during her travels across Africa and other storylines set between her Egyptian exodus and time spent in Kenya. These storylines continue to shift Storm's identity from Kenyan to Egyptian to American expat. Storm's identity presents itself as an African identity rather than tying the superheroine to a specific location or space.

By focusing on an African identity, Marvel writers were able to deemphasize Storm's cultural identity and shift focus to her immigrant status. By focusing on Storm's immigrant identity, the writers rooted Storm's character growth in her pending Americanization. The loss of her family and travels across Africa present Storm as a nomadic figure searching for a home. This search becomes the central storyline for Storm especially in the *Lifedeath Saga*, a handful of comics focused on Storm's struggles with her identity. At the climax of this struggle of identity and search for a home, Storm realizes that the only family she has ever known is the X-Men.²⁴⁷ While early issues featured a woman caught between the cultural values of Kenya and America, by shifting Storm to a nomadic figure her cultural identity becomes centered on her Americanization. She no longer has roots in Kenya but rather it was one of several stops in her search for a home, a home finds in America. This narrative arch heavily ties into US immigration narratives about individuals finding their place in the world by immigrating to America.

²⁴⁶ Claremont, *Uncanny X-Men vol. 1* 102, 12.

²⁴⁷ Chris Claremont. "Lifedeath Part II" *Uncanny X-Men vol. 1* 198 Reprinted in *X-Men: Lifedeath* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1985), 53.

The exploration of Storm's nomadic African roots serves to tie her characterization to her mutant status. The series tellingly emphasizes her African identity in the *Lifedeath Saga* to highlight her Americanization. In the second half of the story, Storm travels across Africa creating a dichotomy between her African identity and her newfound American identity. However, the tension between Storm's duality of colonizer and colonized subject becomes diffused by discarding her African heritage to assert only her Americanization matters. This assertion connects to an earlier thread in the first half of the *Lifedeath Saga* when Forge, a Native American mutant, asserts that only her American identity matters when he says, "what I was has nothing to do with who I am or the life I lead."²⁴⁸ This line contextualizes the following issue as Storm returns to Africa and realizes her identity as an X-Men and American.

By constantly shifting Storm's heritage, the series roots her identity on her mutant status and Americanization. Central to the X-Men mythos is the concept of young mutants learning about their abilities and becoming superheroes. For Storm, her character growth and mastery of her powers becomes directly tied to her Americanization. Despite the global diversity on the new team of X-Men, the two leaders of the team are white American men, and Storm's mastery of her mutant abilities becomes tied to her assimilation of American values. Ultimately, Storm's journey through the *Lifedeath Saga* articulates white liberal immigration rhetoric. Storm discards the patchwork of her previous African identity and becomes an American. In *Lifedeath Part II*, Storm travels across Africa with a young woman, Shani. Shani hopes to return to the African tribe she was born with before the birth of her child. The series openly discusses the role of family and home, but Storm does not share Shani's desire to return home, "I never really had

²⁴⁸ Chris Claremont, "Lifedeath" *Uncanny X-Men vol. 1* 186 Reprinted in *X-Men: Lifedeath* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2016), 31.

that... until I met the X-Men.”²⁴⁹ This scene emphasizes Storm’s assimilation narrative, placing the character firmly in her American identity by rejecting any desire to return home.

Because the superhero is a representation of American values and white liberalism, Storm can only become a superhero through her assimilation to American cultural values. Storm articulates white liberal immigration rhetoric including the presentation of America as a great melting pot, and that she has finally found acceptance with the X-Men. The scene with Shani offers the transformation from pupil to master, as Storm becomes a confident young hero by rejecting her African roots. In terms of her larger narrative, this moment shifts Storm into the future leader of the X-Men.

Storm’s assimilation to American values also shifts her role from naive immigrant towards an activist for mutant rights. Unlike other superheroes, Storm undergoes immense growth from her introduction to the early 1990s. This growth is mostly marked by her assimilation to American culture, but also through her growth as a superhero. Originally introduced as the character with the most difficulty understanding American culture, including the desire to wear clothing, Storm’s questioning of cultural values was played for laughs. While these moments do highlight the cultural differences between her Kenyan village and America, the other characters always explain their point of view as the obvious answer, rather than understanding these cultural differences. By the 1980s, Storm had begun successfully assimilating to American culture, and even joined the counter cultural Punk movement of the 1980s.²⁵⁰ Originally, Storm complained about the restrictive clothing Americans wore, but by the 1980s, Storm wore tight leather pants, a white t-shirt, leather vest, and most notably, she cut her

²⁴⁹ Claremont, *Uncanny X-Men vol. 1* 198, 53.

²⁵⁰ Chris Claremont, “To Have and Have Not” *X-Men vol. 1* 173, (New York: Marvel Comics, 1983), 16.

hair into a mohawk. This change in clothing became an important signifier for Storm, as it distinctly marked her shift from her African heritage to her involvement in American activism, and marks not just a new aesthetic, but her assimilation.²⁵¹

Despite the attempts to negotiate Storm's identity as a colonized subject with her superhero status, Storm's journey provides a fairly simplistic favoring of her American identity. *Lifedeath Part II* carries the individual subtitle name: "From the Heart of Darkness," taken from Joseph Conrad's work describing violence against colonial Congo. Conrad built a central theme surrounding the similarities between white and Black men, but literary critic Chinua Achebe sparked considerable debate in 1975 when he described the racism, dehumanization, and "sets Africa up as an other world, the antithesis of Europe and thus civilization."²⁵² For Claremont to draw upon *Heart of Darkness* and introduce his first major Black character the same year as Chinua Achebe's scathing critique provides some synchronicity. It also draws questions of how *Lifedeath Saga* presents the Storm's African roots in comparison to Conrad's presentation of Africa as the heart of darkness. Unfortunately, Claremont seems to build upon the same problems as Conrad, presenting Africa as a dark space for Storm to escape and a reflection of Storm's depression following the loss of her powers. As Storm journeys across Africa with Shani, she finds new resolve, but at the expense of her heritage; vowing to rejoin the X-Men. *Lifedeath* attempts to have Storm negotiate her identity as a colonized subject and her newfound Americanization, but ultimately falls short of a nuanced discussion of the colonial subject and the American superhero.

²⁵¹ Chris Claremont, "Sanction" *Uncanny X-Men vol. 1* 177, (New York: Marvel Comics, 1984), 11.

²⁵² Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa" *Research in African Literature* Vol. 9 no. 1. Indiana University Press 1978.

Following the loss of her superpowers in *Lifedeath*, Storm's identity shifts to full activist against anti-mutant forces, but her love life hinges on anti-white supremacy activism. While Storm continues to develop a relationship with Forge, despite his anti-mutant gun causing her to lose her powers, she ultimately decides that she cannot date him due to his views about mutants and identity. Storm's love life bares a surprising parallel with Pauli Murray's essay, *Why a Negro Girl Stays Single*. In the piece, Murray describes the difficulties of dating men when as a highly educated woman. While Storm is pursued by various men who desire to date her, she rejects their advances, often due to their positions surrounding activism and rights. However, Storm would eventually choose to date and marry Black Panther in 2006. Despite this occurring decades after the purview of this chapter, the seeds of their relationship were developed in the 1980 comic book *Marvel Team Up 100*. The story features the two characters as youths, and Storm saves T'Challa from white supremacists.²⁵³ Storm's work as an activist plays a role in the development of this romance decades later, as she marries a superhero committed to dismantling white supremacy.

Storm's activism begins to take form as the outspoken leader of the X-Men. By the late 1980s, Storm had developed into a powerful and confident woman, even without her superpowers. Following Professor Xavier's disappearance, the superhero team needs a new leader. Both Storm and Cyclops, a white man and traditionally the second-in-command of the X-Men, argue that they should be given the responsibilities as the new team leader. Cyclops, perhaps channeling his white masculinity, argues that without his leadership the X-Men would be lost. In a brief moment of recognition of different identities, the X-Men push against

²⁵³ John Byrne and Chris Claremont, "Cry... Vengeance!" *Marvel Team-Up 100* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1980), 30.

Cyclops's reasoning and argue that he does not understand their differences.²⁵⁴ But *Uncanny X-Men* hedges this argument and rather than directly recognize Storm's identity as a Black woman, the team argues that Cyclops is from a different generation of mutants, and Storm represents this new generation, perhaps hinting at the new coalitions that were built in the late 80s and early 90s which finally recognized women of color.

In a superhero fashion, Storm and Cyclops agree to fight each other with the winner gaining the role as team leader. In *Uncanny X-Men 201*, Storm defeats Cyclops and assumes the mantle of leadership. Despite their agreement to fight, almost all of the characters feel that Storm deserves respect and should lead the team, but the most vocal is Wolverine, arguing that "Cyclops is no longer cut out to lead this team. His heart just ain't in it anymore."²⁵⁵ Storm's ascension to team leader provides a powerful character arc for Marvel's premiere Black woman and almost all of the X-Men note how she has earned their respect, gained control of her powers, and developed into a strong female role model since leaving Africa. While unspoken, the character roots Storm's growth in her Americanization, that her leadership abilities developed due to her assimilation with Western culture.²⁵⁶ In other words, she's fit to lead the globally diverse X-Men, now that she has fully assimilated and become an American.

As the leader of the X-Men, Storm provides a powerful image of a Black woman leading her white counterparts, however, this position was short lived as Marvel's writer placed Storm in narratives that removed her from her teammates. Despite her lack of superpowers, Storm proves to be an effective leader and her character arc signals massive growth over more than a decade in *Uncanny X-Men*. Storm regains her superpowers in the 1988 storyline *The Fall of the Mutants*,

²⁵⁴ Chris Claremont, "Duel" *Uncanny X-Men Vol. 1 201* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1986), 18.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

but writers continued to remove Storm from the X-Men. When Storm regains her superpowers during the X-Men event comic; the writers quickly whisk her away to an alternate dimension with Forge.²⁵⁷ Then the cybernetic mutant Nanny kidnaps Storm, which removes Storm from her leadership position with the X-Men.²⁵⁸ The long history of Black bodies infantilized comes into focus when the Nanny de-ages Storm into the body of a pre-teen girl. This series not only visually undermines the character's history, but also provides a plot point that removes Storm's character arc over fifteen years as Storm returns to the naive young woman prior to joining the X-Men. While Storm would regain her memories, the issues leave Storm needing the help of the Cajun mutant, Gambit; presenting Storm as a somewhat helpless young woman.

Marvel continually emphasized trauma to repeal her character growth and distance US involvement in the trauma Black bodies faced. Not only is Storm literally infantilized, but the anti-Mutant nation Genosha enslaves her. Drawing the parallels of mutaniety and racialization, the Press Gang, mutants working for the Genoshan government, capture Storm and a handful of other mutants. The storyline becomes filled with racial missteps from the Press Gang, mutants that participate in the enslavement of mutants, to making Genosha a fictional African nation. Both of these examples bear similar ties to the often-repeated argument of Africans enslaved other Africans in the attempts to whitewash the US slave trade. Marvel writers clumsily tied Storm to the history of enslavement, offering a Black woman victimized by other Africans. Marvel continues to delve into topics that reflect racist and white supremacist history in the United States, but ultimately leaves the argument blaming the minority group as complicit.

²⁵⁷ It should also be noted that Storm's storyline here hinges upon Forge, the mutant that caused her loss of power, to return her abilities to her. Unsurprisingly, comic book's most powerful Black woman features a storyline parallel with abuse narratives without exploring the topic with any nuance.

²⁵⁸ Chris Claremont and Louise Simonsen, *Uncanny X-Men: Fall of Mutants* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2011).

Finally reunited with the X-Men, Storm's ability as a leader is frequently called into question with the development of new X-Men team members. The popular mutant Cable, a white man from the future, frequently questions Storm's ability to lead the X-Men. Like Cyclops, the series makes sure the reader knows that Cable's questioning is not based on racism, but that he represents a new generation of mutants. The Introduction of Cable marks the end of the 1980s X-Men series and the beginning of the popular 1990s X-Men characters that Cable would bring forth like Bishop and Deadpool.

Storm marks one of the few Black superheroines in comics and became one of the most popular Marvel characters. While often situated in allegorical parallels, Storm provides an immigrant narrative that presents the American identity as a singular unified identity, rather than noting the fractured and different aspects of her identity as a Black woman in America compared to her white male teammates. Following her Americanization, Storm is repeatedly used as a character to traumatize and abuse, which allows her to voice political activism surrounding her mutant status while downplaying any connection to America's history of racism and sexism, due to her trauma being caused by other mutants. The loss of her powers, her infantilization, and her enslavement all come from other mutants; storylines that present her repeated victimization as caused by her own people, mutants, rather than by those in power. As discussed heavily in Chapter 1, due to her role on a "team book," Storm allows Marvel writers to situate the white male as an oppressed figure. These repeated storylines repeatedly undercut the imagery Marvel attempted to cultivate of the powerful Black superheroine equal to DC Comics' Wonder Woman.

Black Panther: An Apolitical King

From the start, Lee and Kirby incorporated social issues into their comics, and the introduction of their first Black superhero provided social commentary. Unfortunately, this social commentary and progressive political messages were often undercut with the emphasis of fantastical elements that Lee and Kirby attempted to provide the social commentary through. When Black Panther debuted in 1966, the character offered a powerful anti-colonial message for a 1960s comic book, in part because Lee and Kirby do not try to use Klaw as a metaphor, but root Wakanda's struggle in the real violence of colonialism. In Chapter 1, I discussed how Black Panther reiterated white liberalism through his appearance and adherence to Marvel fantastical metaphorical marginalization. In this section, I discuss the role of Black Panther, Wakanda, and the United States to show how Marvel tackled real world racial violence, but often denied US culpability through its African superheroes. This allowed for African heroes to discuss systemic racism and bigotry, but only by whitewashing American history and reinforcing American mythology.

Black Panther provides a subversion of the traditional depictions of Africa to present a nation untouched by colonialism. Unlike Storm's travels across Africa, this subversion also causes Wakanda to be a unique cultural experience rather than the loincloth tribalism found in other comics. While Lee and Kirby choose a "less is more" approach to the techno-tribal utopia, they tell the reader that Wakanda is filled with "modern, super-scientific wonders that we can only Marvel at."²⁵⁹ This subversion lies in *The Thing* and the Human Torch providing commentary comparing Wakanda to stereotypical depictions of Africa, but it also lays the groundwork for one of Marvel's most progressive superheroes.

²⁵⁹ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "The Way It Began..!" *Fantastic Four* 53. Reprinted in *The Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage* (Marvel Comics, New York, August 1966), 26.

Black Panther and the history of Wakanda meaningfully articulate the horrors of colonialism in Africa. In *Fantastic Four 53*, T'Challa, the Black Panther, provides the Fantastic Four with his origin story, which includes the colonial invasion of Wakanda by Ulysses Klaw. A decade prior, when T'Challa was a young boy, Klaw invaded Wakanda searching for the rare mineral, Vibranium. Visually, Kirby depicts the Wakandan warrior gunned down by Klaw's colonial forces and horrific violence committed against the Wakandan people including the murder of T'Chaka, T'Challa's father. T'Challa turns the tide against Klaw by using a powerful sonic weapon that shatters the Klaw's bones. Black Panther's origin provides salient arguments against colonialism and readily features the violence committed against native populations by colonizers. In terms of representation, Lee and Kirby provide an unprecedented depiction of an advanced African utopia. This distinctive representation helped to move comics book forward in the discussion of global issues and the depiction of Black comic book characters.

Despite the positive depictions of Wakanda, the writers rooted the narrative in American Imperialism and Western benevolence, presenting Klaw as a mercenary, rather than as an agent of a Western power. Despite the rejection of Klaw's colonialism, the issue ends with the Fantastic Four urging Black Panther to become a superhero and protect the world.

Unsurprisingly, Black Panther agrees, "I shall do it! I pledge my fortune, my powers -- my very life -- to the service of all mankind."²⁶⁰ This moment is predicated on the white liberalism embedded in the superhero, a white liberalism that cannot abide Black separatism and demands that Black Panther and Wakanda integrate with the rest of the world, but due to the divisions between the Western and Communist powers, it's clear that Black Panther is joining the West. Furthermore, Lee and Kirby present white liberalism as the obvious answer to Wakanda's

²⁶⁰ Lee, *Fantastic Four 53*, 45.

problems, a message that articulates an exceptionalism of white Western beliefs and Black Panther wholeheartedly agrees.²⁶¹

Expanding notions of Western superiority and the unintelligible African culture appear throughout the two issues. After exploring Wakanda and being welcomed as heroes, the Thing remarks that Wakanda is so foreign that only the smartest man in the world, Mr. Fantastic, could understand the culture.²⁶² This remarks presents Wakandan cultural practices as so foreign that the superheroes who negotiated peace with Aliens by showing how similar we are, cannot understand this African culture. Even strangers, King T'Challa, also known as Black Panther, explains that his work in modernizing his nation is a direct result of his time spent abroad. Understandable, the Fantastic Four hold a Western perspective, which allows for readers to engage with the characters, but the Lee and Kirby seem to worry that creating a developed African nation might be too "othered" to comprehend.

After agreeing to join a global community, Black Panther becomes discussed as an exemplary immigrant to distance the hero from the Black Panthers. In *Avengers 54*, Klaw returns as a member of a supervillain team, and Klaw retells the events and his defeat in *Fantastic Four 53*. When Black Panther is confronted by Whirlwind, an ally of Klaw, the villain comments, "you pick up our American vernacular quickly, my African friend!"²⁶³ These comments remind the reader of Black Panther's African origin which intentionally distances the character from the Black radical political organization, the Black Panthers.

²⁶¹ This message occurred in the 2018 film, *Black Panther*, but was mitigated through the nuanced discussion of African vs African American, with T'Challa deciding to help Black bodies around the world

²⁶² Lee, *Fantastic Four 53*, 26.

²⁶³ Roy Thomas and John Buscema, "...And Deliver Us From- The Masters of Evil" *Avengers vol. 1 54* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1968), 13.

It appears that the emphasis of Black Panther's African identity to distance the superhero from Black radicals fails, and instead Marvel briefly renames the character. When Black Panther joins the Avengers in *Avengers 52*, other characters exclusively refer to him as "The Panther" in the first two issues.²⁶⁴ While this name change is just an editorial oversight and quickly changed back by *Avengers 54*, it would not be the last time Marvel would change the name of the Black Panther to distance the hero from the political organization. With the return of the character's name to Black Panther, *Avengers 54* heavily emphasizes T'Challa's African origin. But Marvel changed the name again to Black Leopard. While both began in 1966, Marvel, fearing backlash to their first Black superhero having the same name as a Black militant group, changed the name to Black Leopard. This name change also features T'Challa explaining his firmly neutral stance towards the Black Panther Party and American politics, "I contemplate a return to your country, Ben Grimm, where the latter term has -- political connotations. I neither condemn nor condone those who have taken up the name--" Despite this denial of American political movements, the rest of the issue is focused on Black Panther fighting against the systemic racism in an allegorical South Africa.²⁶⁵ Despite only a brief life as Black Leopard, Marvel spends the first five years of Black Panther existing attempting to distance the character from American political movements.

Historically, the decision to have Black Panther reject his name fall in line with Marvel's desire to straddle this line falls firmly in with Marvel's history of embracing white liberalism. As Dr. King writes about the white moderate:

²⁶⁴ Roy Thomas and John Buscema, "Death Calls for the Arch Heroes!" *Avengers vol. 1 52* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1968), 8.

²⁶⁵ Thomas, *Avengers vol. 1 52*, 14

“the white moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action:” who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a “more convenient season.”²⁶⁶

Marvel fully embraced white moderate liberalism, wanting to have Black Panther sell to young Black boys and girls, but also wanting white children and their parents to not feel uncomfortable as they read a comic about racial inequality.

Unlike other superheroes, which discuss racism as only prejudice, Black Panther constructs racism as a systemic institution, but only in fictional nations that provided no connection to America’s systemic racial injustice. In *Fantastic Four 119*, Black Panther openly discusses systemic racism in the fictional nation of Rudyarda. The fictional nation, an allusion to South African apartheid, provides a depiction of systemic racism. In the issue, Rudyarda is described as the “last stronghold of white supremacy.”²⁶⁷ While a portrayal of the systemic racism in South African, his depiction not only presents racism as nearly defeated, but undercuts the ongoing racism found in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. The series uses Black Panther to discuss the politics of racism, but intentionally distances the character from any analysis of racism in the United States.

Marvel refused to allow for radical political narratives that openly discussed racial discrimination in the United States. As discussed in Chapter 1, Don McGregor’s *Jungle Action*, a

²⁶⁶ Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. 1963. Online: https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

²⁶⁷ Stan Lee, “Three Stood Together” *Fantastic Four 119* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1972), 3.

series that featured Black Panther discuss racism in the United States as a systemic problem, was quietly cancelled. More interesting, is that McGregor's artist, Billy Graham, was the first Black artist to work on major comic publications. McGregor and Graham's *Jungle Action* was critically praised, especially by young Black comic fans who would become writers and artists in the 1990s. Dwayne McDuffie, founder of Milestone Comics and creator of popular Black comic book characters like Static Shock, praised McGregor and Graham's work as one of the greatest superhero comics ever produced.²⁶⁸ Unfortunately, when the duo decided to have Black Panther fight the KKK and openly discuss systemic racism in the United States, Marvel cancelled the series.

Black Panther vs. the Klan provides one of the few presentations of how racism operates in America, not just acknowledging prejudice but systemic racism. Unlike most Marvel series, which present the bigoted figure as the enemy of the Black superhero, Black Panther acknowledges the systemic institutions that affect Black life in America. T'Challa and Monica Lynne, his girlfriend, travel to her home town in Georgia. The series acknowledges the differences African and African Americans face, and the long history of oppression against African Americans post-slavery. During a story about Monica's great grandfather, a free slave, the man is brutally murdered by the KKK for attempting to start a farm. The violence against Black bodies continues into the modern day as Black Panther directly combats the KKK. The comic opens with Black Panther overlooking several hooded figures walking through a graveyard, their long robes and pointed hoods resembling the Ku Klux Klan except their robes are purple and blue, not white. The Dragon's Circle provides a strange metaphorical KKK that is steeped in mysticism, rather than racism. Despite Marvel's use of a group that vaguely resembles

²⁶⁸ Don McGregor and Billy Graham, "Blood Sacrifice" *Jungle Action* 19 Reprinted in *The Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage* (Marvel Comics, New York, August 1966), 293.

the KKK, the Ku Klux Klan appears later in the issue. The KKK and the Dragon's Circle attack Black Panther at the same time, though neither groups are associated with the other, though Black Panther is able to defeat both groups, the Dragon's Circle disappears from the rest of the narrative.

The series presents systemic racism in police departments in the following issue. When Monica Lynne is attacked by two Klan members in a grocery store, Black Panther easily defeats them. When the police appear, they immediately attack Black Panther. As three policemen brutally beat T'Challa, Monica stops them and drops a reference to the 1943 film, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, a John Ford western about a mob murdering the wrong men for a crime. The series draws an obvious comparison to policemen believing that T'Challa is to blame for the incident in the supermarket. While Sheriff Tate, a friend of Monica's, explains the policemen targeted Black Panther due to his costume, it still draws an effective comparison of police brutality against Black bodies.²⁶⁹

After a particularly nasty scrap, Monica gives voice to racial microaggressions, comparing them to the near-death experience of T'Challa fighting against the Klan. Monica questions the violence committed on Black bodies, but notes, "people perpetuate psychological punishments on each other every day... often very calculated... but it seems less cruel even if it isn't... We're blissfully unaware of the maiming of minds."²⁷⁰ McGregor highlights how society focuses on the larger acts of violence, but that microaggressions can cause significant and long-lasting trauma to racial minorities.

²⁶⁹ Don McGregor and Billy Graham, "Slaughter in the Streets" *Jungle Action* 20 Reprinted in *The Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage* (Marvel Comics, New York, August 1966), 303.

²⁷⁰ Don McGregor and Billy Graham, "Cross of Fire... Cross of Death!" *Jungle Action* 21 Reprinted in *The Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage* (Marvel Comics, New York, August 1966), 322.

Despite this violence and racism against Black bodies, Kevin Trublood, a reporter, argues that Americans should still love their country despite its imperfections. As Black Panther fights nine Klan members, Trublood has dinner with Monica. During their dinner, Trublood argues that he still believes in the myths he was taught in school about America and that despite the racial violence he's seen, he still holds onto his idealism. Perhaps meant to rebuke more leftist political factions, Trublood argues:

"I still believe in this country. I know that's unfashionable these days... and sometimes... knowing much of our history... I wonder why I still believe. But I know why! I believe in the fairy tales... the myths I was taught in school... the values this country was supposed to stand for. I still want to believe in those myths. In fact I still do! And if this country isn't perfect, so what! Nothing is! And we'll keep fighting until America lives up to the things it proclaimed it was!"²⁷¹

Trublood provides a compelling rebuke of the violence seen and calls upon white readers to pledge themselves to making America better than it was.

The pledge is followed by a consideration about black bodies during the reconstruction era, and the longstanding violence against black men and women. In McGregor's final Black Panther comic, the Monica tells about her grandfather's history during the reconstruction era and being targeted by the Klan. The singular issues do not fall into the traditional rewriting of American history, but instead explains how racism persisted even after the Civil War and the development of the Klan. However, the series emphasizes the feckless nature of racists when it inserts Black Panther in a moment of wish fulfillment, as T'Challa discusses how he would have

²⁷¹ McGregor, *Jungle Action* 20, 310-311.

fought the Klan had he been there. While comics often operate as wish fulfillment, the series presents the desire to fight the Klan as wishful thinking of the Black superhero.

The choice to downplay political discussions with Black Panther, inadvertently caused Black Panther to languish and never gained traction, in part because Marvel did not know what to do with the character outside of these racial political narratives. When Marvel launched *Black Panther Volume 1* in 1977 with legendary artist Jack Kirby at the helm, the series shifted from McGregor's discussion of racism to a typical fantastical tale that features Black Panther travel around the globe. The new series shifts Black Panther from a grounded discussion of racism to a hero working for a group known as the Collectors, a group of artifact collectors that force Black Panther to loot other culture's artifacts. Despite the star power of Jack Kirby, *Black Panther* ran for only fifteen issues.

The cancellation of *Jungle Action* and *Black Panther* points towards a larger issue Marvel Comics faced during the 1970s, the inability to utilize Black superheroes outside of a white liberal perspective. As a character, Black Panther provides a powerful voice against racism from his introduction against Klaw to his work in Rudyarda to eventually fighting the KKK. However, when Marvel tried to feature Black Panther as just a superhero, the character continually fell flat. The most success the character found was during his tenure fighting the KKK, but the series articulated a Black radical voice rather than the white liberal superhero voice that Marvel repeatedly emphasized. Prior to Ta-Nehisi Coates, Christopher Priest's run on *Black Panther Volume 3* provided a take on the character and roots Black Panther firmly into Afro-futurism. Black Panther's success decades after his creation seems to come from Black writers and artists providing a perspective outside of the white liberal superhero.

As an immigration narrative, Black Panther offers powerful ties to repeatedly distance the hero from American systemic racism. Unlike other immigration narratives which primarily offer narratives of unity, Black Panther does not tie directly into the desire to become American or present color-blind arguments surrounding racism. However, the Black Panther comic series does distance American history and the then-present from the narratives surrounding racism, as Marvel almost exclusively presents ideas of racism as not present in America. As Black Panther handles the racism of Rudyarda or Klaw's colonialism, Marvel intentionally distances Black Panther from Black political movements and the discussion of systemic racism in American society.

Brother Voodoo: The Embodiment of Double Consciousness

The introduction of Brother Voodoo in *Strange Tales* shifts the superhero narrative outside of the United States to Haiti. Brother Voodoo debuted in *Strange Tales* 169, and Len Wein explained the comic was mostly used to try out new heroes and hope to find a hit comic book character.²⁷² Created to capitalize on the success of horror comics during the 1970s, Brother Voodoo was created by committee. Stan Lee wanted a Voodoo hero, Marvel's Editor-In-Chief Roy Thomas suggested the name Dr. Voodoo, Len Wein was tasked with creating the backstory, and John Romita designed the character.²⁷³ While Stan Lee had them change the name to Brother Voodoo, the doctor elements remained as Jericho went to medical school. Admirably, Wein spent time researching Voodoo practices in a hope to provide authenticity to the character and worked with Romita to design Brother Voodoo. Rather than trusting the Marvel Method which

²⁷² Michael Aushenker, "Disposable Heroes" *Back Issue! 71* (Raleigh, NC: ToMorrrows Publishing, 2014), 36.

²⁷³ *ibid.*, 33.

relies heavily on the artist, Wein wrote tight panel-by-panel scripts detailing the plot points of Brother Voodoo, and had the artist draw each panel described.²⁷⁴ Wein spent a considerable amount of time constructing the Haitian superhero and hoping to provide a powerful and positive image.

The opening issue of *Strange Tales* features Jericho caught between his family in Haiti and his life in America. Jericho Drumm, a pathologist, returns to Haiti when his brother, Daniel, falls deathly ill due to the Voodoo practiced by Damballah, the serpent god. Unable to save his brother, Jericho binds Daniel's spirit to his body during a ritual referred to as Dance Vaudou. Jericho was born in Haiti, but the series makes it explicitly clear that he grew up in the United States and juxtaposes Jericho's belief in science and Western medicine with his brother's role as Houngan, a Voodoo priest. This dichotomy between Voodoo and Western medicine provides a conflict between Jericho and his dying brother early in the story, that is resolved only when Jericho confronts the primary villain, Damballah.

The contrasting of Haiti and America presents Brother Voodoo as not only an outsider, but also constructs American culture as monolithic. Central to the series resides a contrast of Haitian and American society, a choice that not only presents Jericho as an outsider, but also presents American identity as monolithic. Despite being born in Haiti and having Haitian relatives, Len Wein centers Brother Voodoo's identity on his time spent in America as a pathologist, which is reinforced through secondary characters referring to Jericho as an American, doctor, or even an outsider.²⁷⁵ Despite this outsider status, Wein also presents Jericho as knowledgeable of Haitian culture and religious practices. Because Jericho spent his formative

²⁷⁴ Aushenker, 34.

²⁷⁵ Len Wein and Roy Thomas, "Brother Voodoo!" *Strange Tales* 169 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1973), 14.

years in New Orleans, he understands Haitian culture and Voodoo, though he does not believe in the religion at the start of the series.

However, the origin story intentionally fragments Brother Voodoo's identity and begins to deconstruct the notion of a monolithic American culture. After the death of Daniel, Jericho undergoes a voodoo ritual and has Daniel's soul bound to his body, literally fragmenting Brother Voodoo's identity into the two brothers, one American and one Haitian.²⁷⁶ Through the first two issues, Jericho questions Voodoo and Haitian religious customs, often arguing for the superiority of Western medicine. However, after binding the soul of his dead brother to himself, Jericho begins to find power in his cultural background, often noting that his faith as a source of power. The fragmentation of Brother Voodoo, the body of Jericho and the soul of Daniel, provides a narrative surrounding the fragmentation of identity in the immigrant, a hero torn over their assimilation to American cultural practices and the desire to hold onto their family's cultural identity.

Like most heroes to debut in *Strange Tales*, Brother Voodoo proved to be failure for his own solo book series. While talking about the hero, Len Wein said, "I thought it was a book that worked very well. It didn't get a reaction from the audience that I felt it deserved of all the things we tried."²⁷⁷ Despite this initial failure, the character has found an audience in recent years and taken over the role of Sorcerer Supreme from Doctor Strange and transformed into the new hero, Doctor Voodoo, the name originally suggested by Marvel's Editor-in-Chief Roy Thomas.

While Brother Voodoo failed, and Marvel cancelled *Strange Tales*; the story of Brother Voodoo hints at the larger hurdles Marvel faced with their new comics. To be clear, there is no

²⁷⁶ Len Wein and Roy Thomas, "Baptism of Fire!" *Strange Tales* 170 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1973), 8.

²⁷⁷ Aushenker, 36.

doubt that Marvel's primary focus was creating popular superheroes that would become extremely profitable for the comic book company. In an effort to generate these new heroes, Marvel would often debut them in episodic books like *Strange Tales* or *Tales of Suspense* and proceed from there. Unlike other characters, Brother Voodoo generated controversy including several Christian readers demanding Marvel stop publishing the character due to his use of non-Christian religious practices.²⁷⁸ Not only was Brother Voodoo unpopular, but the character was generating controversy, which Marvel routinely shied away from.

Brother Voodoo generated controversy, and the Comics Code Authority seemed intent to target the character. Looking back on Brother Voodoo, Len Wein, the author for the five issues of *Strange Tales* the character appeared in, described the peculiar choices the Comics Code would make surrounding the character. The Comics Code refused to allow for zombies to appear in comics, due to their lack of literary appearances compared to vampires or werewolves, but they allowed for the made up term Zuvembie.²⁷⁹ I mention this not because the Comics Code would attempt to alter a Black superhero, but rather highlighting that the Comics Code was often fickle, and the censors often provided nonsensical choices for what was permitted in comics and that Brother Voodoo had to overcome not just readers, but the often mercurial Comics Code. This left Marvel with a character that generated excitement from some readers, but ultimately was not as successful as the boilerplate superheroes that proved to be popular in other comics.

Like Black Panther, Brother Voodoo highlights that Marvel authors, both artists and writers, seemed to have more leftist politics than the editors at the company. Wein and McGregor spent considerable time developing Black superheroes to provide more than just a token Black hero. While Brother Voodoo and Black Panther were initially received as unpopular

²⁷⁸ Aushenker, 36.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 36.

heroes that needed to be featured in team books rather than solo series, both characters eventually found their voice decades later and developed into popular comic book entities.

Nubia

Despite only briefly appearing in DC Comics, Nubia's appearance marks the first Black superheroine for DC Comics and the second Black superhero to appear, preceded by The Butterfly.²⁸⁰ While the Butterfly appeared in only two issues, Nubia would appear intermittently in Wonder Woman comics for the next few decades. In her aptly titled essay *Wonder Woman*, Gloria Steinem argues that Wonder Woman bridged the first and second wave feminist movements and Jill Lepore extended this argument in *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* by providing a detailed examination of William Moulton Marston, Wonder Woman's creator. Because of this illustrious feminist history, one might hope that Nubia could provide a link between the second and third waves of feminism. Unfortunately, Nubia provides a rather limited feminist message that undercuts the experiences of women of color. The feminist message provided by Nubia rings hollow because it concludes a uniform experience of womanhood, rather than noting the different experiences between women of color and white women. Unlike Wonder Woman, who's feminist message benefited from the infusion of liberal politics into the character, Nubia's embraces the white liberal feminist messages that would be critiqued by the third wave feminist movement, a movement built upon understanding the different experiences women around the world face.

²⁸⁰ The Butterfly, created by Skywald Publications, only appeared in two issues of the short-lived series *Hell-Rider*. Despite the failure of *Hell-Rider*, Skywald's horror comics proved to be successful until Marvel flooded the market with horror comics, and Marvel's distributed refused to stock Skywald Comics in an effort to drive Skywald Publications out of business. Skywald closed its doors in 1974.

Despite the narrative hinging upon Wonder Woman and Nubia experiencing radically different childhoods, the underlying message refuses to acknowledge these differences. Because Ares brainwashed Nubia, she's introduced as an antagonist and fights her sister. Despite the differences of childhood, Nubia claims the mantle of Wonder Woman and reflects Wonder Woman's prominent character traits of compassion, empathy, and a desire to not be tied to men.²⁸¹ Because Nubia serves as a reflection of Wonder Woman but with dark skin, she also embodies the white liberal feminist message Wonder Woman provides. Admittedly, the feminist message Nubia provides should be celebrated, especially in the superhero genre which often uses women as little more than sexual objects, but this message should also be critiqued for its erasure of Black womanhood and refusal to acknowledge racial difference.

The twin sister reveal highlights Nubia as an extension of the white feminism embedded in Wonder Woman. When Hippolyta reveals that Nubia is Wonder Woman's twin sister, the story only focuses on their similarities, rather than their differences. The adherence to white liberalism and desire to present these two women as the same not only refuses to address the differences in racial identity but bafflingly refuses to address that Nubia was raised by Wonder Woman's greatest enemy. While white liberalism often hindered the political messages in comics, this moment marks a point where it also limited the narrative. The writers rooted Nubia in a color-blind feminist framework that does not account for racial difference, cultural differences, or being raised by a vengeful god of war.

Nubia's history becomes marked through different cultures as she exists as a pan-African identity. While Wonder Woman is distinctly Greek inspired, Nubia builds upon a mishmash of

²⁸¹ Robert Kanigher and Don Heck, "The War of the Wonder Women" *Wonder Woman* 206 (New York: DC Comics, 1973), 6.

mythology from the Middle East, her name is Egyptian, and she vows to protect Africa.²⁸² This collection of African cultures presents Nubia as a pan-African identity meant to be marked as a site of difference rather than be culturally accurate. The pan-African identity often exists only to assimilate the African superhero to white Western values. This homogenization of Africa roots these superheroes as African rather than a specific nationality or cultural identity, marking these women as exotic and their character growth linked by their eventual adherence to white Western values.²⁸³

Nubia's appearance is brief, but she lays the groundwork that more popular characters, like Storm, would adhere to. She provides a characterization of Africa as a single cultural entity and argues for white liberal values including the erasure of Black women's experiences. The problematic portrayal of Black women in comics begins with Nubia, but unfortunately does not end there.

Vixen

The trend of constructing a unified African culture continues with the emergence of Vixen. Originally introduced in DC Comics' series, *Action Comics*; like Nubia and Storm, Vixen blends non-Western cultures together to create a patchwork of cultural signifiers that represent her "African" identity. Introduced as Mari McCabe, a glamorous fashion model, Vixen's backstory presents a character that fights crime in developing nations across the globe. Vixen first appeared in a 1981 issue of *Action Comics*, this makes her character not only appear on the tail end of this first push for African American superheroes, but also a collection of the

²⁸² Whaley, 99.

²⁸³ Aside from the fictional countries like Wakanda, Africa becomes collection of welded together cultures and stereotypes.

idiosyncrasies of the characters that appeared prior like Storm and Nubia. More importantly, Vixen's African and model identities highlight the larger use of women as African immigrant characters: the creation of an exotic feminine other.

Despite the care given to Vixen's cultural identity, the character defends not only Africa, but the developing world. Like Nubia and Storm, Vixen operates as a sign of Africa, but her superhero status moves her to defend all nations. Her superhero abilities mark her as west African; Vixen uses the Tantu Totem, a magical necklace that provides her with the ability to use the abilities of various animals, for instance in her first appearance she uses the ashe of an elephant to briefly match superman's strength. The ashe, or spirit, is a West African Yoruba tradition. The writers solidify Vixen's west African heritage by having the Tantu Totem constructed by Anasi, a spider trickster and shapeshifter god of the Akan people, another West African group. While this conflation of two west African traditions is not surprising, the writers rooting Vixen into a west African tradition rather than a pan-African one shows more care and nuance given to Vixen's cultural identity than her other superheroic counterparts. Despite the West African roots, Vixen begins her superhero journey in India.

The decision to have Vixen fight against individuals across the globe presents a character whose purpose is to reinforce US imperialism globally, rather than just in Africa. While cancelled before it could debut, Vixen's planned solo series highlights a depiction of Africa that demands US intervention. The daughter of a reverend, Mari McCabe fights against her uncle, a dictatorial general, who desires to upend the global society and turn Africa into a united power. The series presents the desire to unite Africa as one that can only be achieved through violent oppression and situates General Manitoba as comparable to Adolf Hitler.²⁸⁴ While Manitoba is

²⁸⁴ Gerry Conway, Carla Conway, and Bob Oksner, "The Vixen" *Cancelled Comics Cavalcade 2* (New York: DC Comics, 1978), 245.

certainly evil, the series links his desire to create a new world and upend the history of colonialism as a horrific act equal to the holocaust. Manitoba's opposition to US imperialism becomes presented as violent oppression, a choice which situates US imperialism as beneficial to Africa.

The lack of nuance surrounding the depiction of Africa and colonialism create the false juxtaposition between violent dictator and US imperialism. Because Manitoba is evil and violent, his desire to upend US imperialism becomes depicted as equally villainous. The simplistic message ties US imperialism as a method of creating stable democracies in Africa, rather than the longstanding policy of overthrowing democratically elected leaders to install dictators who were favorable to US global interests.

Conclusion

Both Marvel and DC used Black immigrant characters to construct an American identity to be strived for. This identity was largely built upon the perpetuated myth of the melting pot as these characters negotiated with and were torn between their traditional identity and their new identity as Americans. However, while these characters celebrated the history of immigration in America, they also refused to explore the role of colonial and western imperialism upon the nations and cultures they emigrated from. While fictional nations and cultures like Wakanda and Tantu provide more exploration as they're often inbound from the Western perspective of Africa, the real national and cultural identities presented in these comics leaves a lot to be desired.

Storm, Brother Voodoo, and Nubia all experience direct colonial oppression and violence through US and Western intervention in Africa and Haiti, but none of the writers explore how these violent interventions shaped these superheroes and the societies they grew up in. Instead,

these characters often provide multiple ties to the various cultures on the African continent. The building of a pan-African presentation not only highlights the purpose of these characters, to be symbols of Africa, rather than characters who happen to be African. This distinction traces itself back to the use of tokenism when introducing Black characters.

Unsurprisingly, the African superhero cannot be separated from the gender dynamics of these characters. While most Black superheroes are male, the African super heroine provides some of the most prominent Black women in comics during this long decade. Removed from feminist movements and Black power movements, the Black superheroine provides a character to be guided and trained by white men. Both Storm and Vixen, the two prominent superhero ones featured for Marvel and DC, become central to team books led by white American men.

Despite this gender gap, the most prominent role of the African superhero continued to tie back to the denunciation of Black power movements. Black Panther changes his name, Storm provides straw man arguments that are easily dismissed by white liberal justifications, and other heroes perpetuate the liberalism's myths of immigration. Like other Black superheroes introduced, the immigrant hero continues to operate as a sign of white liberal color-blindness and calls for the dismissal of Black radicalism.

Chapter 5:

The Black Protector: Posthuman Monsters and White Guilt

The black superhero intersects with Afrofuturism.²⁸⁵ Both the superhero genre and Afrofuturism provide powerful images of black bodies in futurescapes, fictional technologies, and fantasy narratives. However, Afrofuturism provides powerful thematic narratives built upon the African diaspora to reimagine black identity and “the missing history of people of African descent and their roles in science, technology, and science fiction.”²⁸⁶ In chapter 3, I examine how the inclusion of Gabriel Jones and Isaiah Bradley rewrote Marvel’s history of the black body in WWII. Like Afrofuturism, the superhero genre often restructures history and offers glimpses of imagined futures, despite these similarities, the black superhero in these imagined spaces often risks becoming a post-human monstrosity, a disparaging construction of blackness as antithetical to the imagined future. In this chapter, I map the aesthetic theory of Afrofuturism onto the post-human black superhero, a figure distinctly marked as an imagined post-human construction of the black body.

Unlike other superheroes, this figure interrogates the role of the black body as a marginalized figure due to their literal dehumanization often melding with technology, mythological creatures, or rewriting of non-western cultural identities. In Afrofuturism, black artists reclaim the future from whiteness with recurring themes of history, liberation, and the African diaspora. Both Afrofuturism and the post-human black superhero operates in imagined

²⁸⁵ While not interchangeable in most contexts, I frequently use black rather than African American to describe the characters in this chapter. While events are often limited to the experiences African Americans have faced in an American context, these heroes operate in strange futuristic lands without a clearly defined context of America. The desire to feature the black body without the African American mind is central to the creation of a post-racial black superhero.

²⁸⁶ Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 17.

future or fantasy-scape and rewrites the history of black identities. However, the purpose of Afrofuturism vs. the post-human black superhero provides radically different interpretations of those fantasy/futurescapes. While Afrofuturism presents the black identity in conjunction with the imagined fantasy or techno-identity, the post-human black superhero features the imagined identity nullifying blackness. In this chapter, I position the growing prominence of Afrofuturism during the 1970s and 1980s against the white liberalism inherent in superhero comics in an effort to map how white writers rooted the post-human black superhero in black disparagement, white innocence, and the erasure of black identities and their politics from the imagined American future.

The Afrofuturist Theory and Aesthetics

Afrofuturism operates as both an aesthetic and ideological practice. While work on Afrofuturism begins with Ralph Ellison's seminal *Invisible Man*, the term would be coined in Mark Dery's 1994 essay, *Black to the Future*. Dery describes Afrofuturism as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture — and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future."²⁸⁷ The movement often rewrites or reconstructs the history of the African Diaspora to construct these futures. Aesthetically, these images focus on African American and Afro Diasporic people in a technoculture or futurescape.

The appearance of black bodies in technoculture is an ideological critique of white liberalism in science fiction, which often constructs the future as a color-blind futurescape built

²⁸⁷ Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 136.

upon individuality and choice. This critique stems from the lack of choice and denial of individuality of black bodies throughout American history. During a roundtable conversation, Mark Dery asks “can the community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?”²⁸⁸ These questions become more pressing when considering the ideological underpinnings of imagined futures be they socialist in *Star Trek* or corporatist in *Alien*, they are often rooted in whiteness. In other words, aesthetics and ideology cannot be easily separated without thoughtful consideration in the meaning behind the construction of these images.

While white comic book authors appropriated the aesthetics of what would become Afrofuturism, they did so without considering the ideological underpinnings behind Afrofuturist aesthetics. While the term Afrofuturist would not be coined for a decade, these aesthetics were gaining prominence in the 1970s and 1980s black America. Artists and authors like Sun Ra and Octavia Butler rose to prominence and started the Afrofuturist movement, long before there was terminology. Just as the comic book industry had used Blaxploitation to develop the first black superheroes, Afrofuturist aesthetics and questions found their way into black comic book characters. These new superheroes drew from this aesthetic, but the ideological practices were limited through white liberalism, creating new ideologically intricate characters that attempted to build upon an aesthetic at odds with the ideology preached. This practice created new grotesque monsters that attempted to meld the imagery and ideology without considering their political consequences.

In this chapter, I position the growing prominence of Afrofuturism during the 1970s and 1980s against the white liberalism inherent in superheroes in an effort to map how white writers

²⁸⁸ Mark Dery. *Flame Wars*, 180.

rooted post-human black superheroes in black disparagement, white innocence and fear, and an erasure of black identities from the American future. Finally, I position the role of Egyptian iconography, a prominent aesthetic theme in Afrofuturist, as an antithesis of white modernity that operated as a corrupting force of violence and barbarism in both Marvel and DC Comics. Both of these threads provide a faux-Afrofuturist narrative that positions blackness in alternative spaces that emphasizes a non-bigoted futurescape and refuses to address the long history of racial inequality. The political messages embedded in these narratives emphasizes black disparagement and white innocence in racial inequality.

Cyborg: Posthuman Black Pain

Introduced in *The New Teen Titans*, Cyborg provides the most popular example of the role of the Afrofuture aesthetic through a white liberal lens, which attempts to rewrite historical narratives of race and trauma while imagining a post-racial aesthetic to obscure the racialized body. *The New Teen Titans*, like most comics in the 1970s and 1980s, utilized tokenism to present a post-racial society. While centering the black body through technology provides obvious connections to the Afrofuturism, Cyborg wrestles with the topics central to the Afrofuturism: reclamation and liberation. However, unlike Afrofuturism, Cyborg's role on the superhero team primarily operates as an extension of a white supremacist framework that erases the black body.²⁸⁹ This framework not only minimizes the role whiteness played in atrocities committed against black bodies, but also envisions a future of post-racial harmony predicated upon the elimination of black masculinity. Unlike most depictions of the future as a post-racial

²⁸⁹ By white supremacist framework, I mean that the character operates as an extension of the inherent white supremacy embedded in Western culture. For this comic, that framework primarily operates through white liberalism, which attempts to obscure the role whiteness has played in the atrocities committed against African American people in the United States.

society, Cyborg operates as a site that considers the present-day role of technology, racial identity, and the history of black bodies in the United States. The themes extend into Afrofuturism's theme of liberation and situate Cyborg as a white liberal appropriation of Afrofuturism which projects white innocence, disparages the black family unit, and argues for the erasure of the black body.

For Cyborg, reclaiming the past corresponds to reclaiming "blackness" from black radicalism. Before white authors could root Cyborg in white liberalism, *The New Teen Titans* demonized black political messages and constructed black radicals as violent terrorists. The primary representation of black radicalism in Cyborg's origin story is Ron Evers, a childhood friend of Cyborg and the primary antagonist in Cyborg's origin. Through Ron, the narrative presents black radicalism as an outgrowth of gang violence. Ron addresses systemic racism in police departments, "the cops are comin' down on us cause we're black," and the series allows the reader to immediately dismiss his complaint because Ron is a gang leader. Ron admits, "we got ourself a rumble going tonight with a white gang called 'the hawks.'"²⁹⁰ Ron's criminality allows the author to sidestep his complaints about police and generalizes black radicals as gang members.

The presentation of black power as racist and gang related vilifies their political views and allows for respectability politics of white liberalism to become the only legitimate arguments about race. Cyborg argues black power movements are racist through his commentary, "I was insulated as a kid and I didn't grow up hating anyone because of color-- -- but Ron was my friend."²⁹¹ The writers use Ron to create strawman arguments against black radicalism. These

²⁹⁰ Marv Wolfman and George Perez, "Cyborg" *Tales of the Teen Titans 1* Reprinted in *Teen Titans Omnibus vol. 1* (New York: DC Comics, 2017), 579.

²⁹¹ Wolfman, *Tales of the Teen Titans 1*, 579.

strawman arguments hint at the white liberal positionality of the authors and argue black radicalism stems from the hatred of white people.

Not content to merely misconstrue black radicalism as racist or criminal, the series concludes that black radicalism is a terrorist ideology. Before becoming Cyborg, the series depicts Victor as an angry young man looking for guidance and Ron as a manipulative figure seeking to radicalize Victor. When Ron describes his plan to take hostages at the Statue of Liberty, Victor realizes Ron's bigotry and refuses to join him. Police arrest Ron during this demonstration and he spends a year in jail, during which Victor becomes Cyborg.²⁹² After Ron's release from prison, he seeks Victor out to help him with a terrorist attack. Ron tells Victor, "I tied in with some real good folk now -- no more takin' over statues. We're going after the big target man-- the United Nations. An' we're goin' after it with dyn-o-mite!"²⁹³ In his first act as a superhero, Cyborg stops Ron's attack on the United Nations and rebukes black radical terrorism.

Because Cyborg's origin demonizes black radicalism, the series turns to white liberalism as the only sensible alternative for addressing racial politics in the United States. Cyborg's turn from black radical to liberal occurs when Ron argues Victor is privileged compared to most black people. During a heated exchange, Ron observes Victor's success is primarily due to his father, "easy for you to say, man. You got a scholarship for college your old man arranged... you got it all."²⁹⁴ Victor contends, "just stop it right there, Ron. Nobody gave me that scholarship. I worked damn hard for that."²⁹⁵ Instead of admitting his advantages, Cyborg argues with Ron that his success stems completely from his hard work and exemplifies the liberal notion of success as

²⁹² The series insinuates that Ron intends to take people hostage at the statue of liberty. But that he was arrested before they could begin.

²⁹³ Wolfman, *Tales of the Teen Titans 1*, 589.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 582.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 582.

a meritocracy.²⁹⁶ Victor extends his argument to color-blindness by contending, “I proved myself. I worked an’ got what I wanted. Anyone can do that, Ron-- and the color of your skin doesn’t matter one damn bit.”²⁹⁷ As Cyborg preaches individuality, the series infantilizes black radicalism, as Raven, a fellow Teen Titan, comments that his rejection of Ron’s politics were because Victor was “growing up.”²⁹⁸ Victor roots himself in liberalism’s arguments of the need for a meritocracy to reject Ron’s arguments of racism.

While infantilizing black radicalism and arguments of continued racism, the series attempts to alleviate white guilt of black trauma and experience in the United States by constructing the black family as a neglectful and damaging influence upon young black men. In his report to Richard Nixon, Daniel Moynihan argued the black family needed to return to the role of the patriarchal family unit and presented the problems facing black communities as self-inflicted.²⁹⁹ Superficially, Victor’s family subverts Moynihan’s arguments and the traditional depiction of the black family unit as broken. Not only is the Stone family intact, but Victor’s parents are successful scientists. However, the series emphasizes that Victor’s trauma is caused by his mother and father. In Cyborg’s origin story, his teammates learn Victor’s parents were not only emotionally neglectful but often conducted experiments on their son, viewing Victor as “more a guinea pig than a son.”³⁰⁰ Familial issues are nothing new in superhero comics, but while comics depict the loss of white parents as a site of trauma, *The New Teen Titans* presents black love and the black family as equally damaging. In the span of a few panels, Victor

²⁹⁶ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 4th Edition. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 8.

²⁹⁷ Wolfman, *Tales of the Teen Titans 1*, 582.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 582.

²⁹⁹ Daniel Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action Report* (Washington DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965), 5. Online: <https://web.stanford.edu/~mrosenfe/Moynihan%27s%20The%20Negro%20Family.pdf>

³⁰⁰ Wolfman, *Tales of the Teen Titans 1*, 573.

contends, “I told you they loved me” and “now, they didn’t dream they might be hurtin’ me... that was the way it mostly was.”³⁰¹ Interestingly, Starfire, an alien member of the team, challenges Victor’s assertion that his parents loved him, “I feel sorry for you Victor. On Tamaran love is everything.”³⁰² The comic constructs the concept of love as literally a universal trait, but also presents the black family unit lacking love. Through Cyborg’s origin, white writers presented the black family as a damaging and dysfunctional institution with distorted perceptions of love.

Equally problematic, Cyborg’s origin constructs the black community as another site of dangerous influence and delinquency for young black men. Unsatisfied with his familial life, Victor begins sneaking out of the laboratory and wandering around the city. One evening, Cyborg meets a young Ron Evers, who becomes Cyborg’s “first friend.”³⁰³ While Cyborg talks about how fun Ron was, the images show them destroying property and smoking. Eventually, the police arrest Victor for “looting a grocery store.”³⁰⁴ Without other characters from the black community in the series, Ron becomes the representation of black community outside of the Stone family.³⁰⁵ The series firmly ties blackness with criminality, when Silas argues the black community is composed of “animals! I did not raise you to be shot down on some street corner.”³⁰⁶ For Silas, Victor’s association with any black person lends itself to potential criminality, which is why Victor was never allowed to associate with his surrounding community. The longstanding construction of blackness with criminality extends to black

³⁰¹ Wolfman, *Tales of the Teen Titans 1*, 574.

³⁰² Ibid., 574.

³⁰³ Ibid., 575.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 576.

³⁰⁵ This is reinforced as Ron becomes the leader of a gang, and during ideological battles with Victor, other black characters side with Ron’s arguments. Even the store owner that Victor and Ron loot is white.

³⁰⁶ Wolfman *Tales of the Teen Titans 1*, 578.

radicalism, as a panel features a large “Black Power” post hanging over Victor’s bed.³⁰⁷ The series constructs the popular pipeline scenario, where the dysfunction of a black family causes criminality and black radicalism. Cyborg’s origin insinuates crime stems from an inherent dysfunction of black families, alleviating any white guilt surrounding black circumstances. This pipeline scenario continues to be used as a racist dog whistle for why crime occurs in black communities.

As *The New Teen Titans* dismissed black radicalism as a legitimate political ideology, the series rewrites the trauma suffered by black communities as self-inflicted. The accident, the site of Cyborg’s trauma, occurs when Silas Stone brings a “blasphemy from another dimension” to earth, and the creature burns Victor’s body and dissolves his bones. Victor’s father decides to build him the cybernetic suit designed for US soldiers, but the series makes clear that this experiment and trauma was caused by Victor’s father without authorization, “the body-parts weren’t authorized for use, but my father didn’t care.”³⁰⁸ While Silas wanted to save his son, the experiments on Victor fit a pattern of Silas Stone using his son to further his scientific research and bear similarities to the experiments conducted on African Americans in the United States. However, the series highlights black familial trauma to scapegoat this history of white experimentation, when Cyborg directly rebukes Rod’s claims of racism, “my father did this to me, no white man.”³⁰⁹ *The New Teen Titans* situates the trauma black communities experience as self-inflicted by placing the onus of responsibility on Silas Stone while removing any culpability of the US Government.

³⁰⁷ Wolfman, *Tales of the Teen Titans 1*, 578.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 584.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 589.

White writers frame Cyborg's initial character development around the white gaze's belief of black self-pity and regress. Central to white liberalism is the inherent belief that "if blacks would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less then Americans of all hues could "all get along.""³¹⁰ Similarly, writer rooted Victor's transformation into a superhero as a moment for self-pity. Cyborg offers a subtextual reading of how the white gaze constructs the black mind's inability to let go of past trauma and move forward.³¹¹ Despite becoming a superhero, Cyborg frequently bemoans his superhuman body and resents his father for turning him into a superhero. Despite this initial resentment, under the guidance of white superheroes like Robin and Kid Flash, Cyborg forgives his father and thanks his friends for letting him focus on the future. It is only through this character development that Cyborg is able to fulfill his potential as a superhero on the *New Teen Titans*. This moment lends itself to different constructions of liberation for black and white communities. White people feel that liberation comes out of forgetting the past, yet for black people the reclaiming the forgotten or hidden history allows for liberation from white historical narratives.

Because Marv Wolfman and George Perez rooted Cyborg in white liberalism, the series provides liberation only through discarding one's racial identity. The envisioned futures of Afrofuturism place the black body in a future context but still in dialogue with the past and present. Because writers situated Cyborg's past and present in white liberalism, it should come as little surprise that the developed future context of Cyborg is the erasure of black identities. After all, white liberalism develops color-blindness and advocates for the erasure of minority groups through cultural assimilation. After accepting his trauma and cybernetic body, *The New Teen*

³¹⁰ Bonilla-Silva, 1.

³¹¹ Marv Wolfman and George Perez. "The Birth of the Titans" *The New Teen Titans 1* Reprinted in *Teen Titans Omnibus vol. 1* (New York: DC Comics, 2017), 37.

Titans series presents Cyborg developing new weapons, technology, and upgrades for his cybernetic body. The acceptance of his circumstances allows for Cyborg to construct his own future but, the imagined future presents Cyborg eliminating his visible blackness.

The elimination of his visible blackness comes with the development of Cyberion, a new fully cybernetic body with no visible markings of a racialized body. The original design of Cyborg's appearance loosely resembles a basketball or track and field uniform. Throughout the 1980s, Cyborg slowly developed a more metal body. This occurred primarily due to the DC editorial wanted to update their characters to look more serious following the popularity of Frank Miller's revisions of Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One*. The redesigning of characters caused Cyborg's body to become encased in metal. However, the series frames the loss of his body as an effort to upgrade his capabilities and be more useful to the team. The early depictions of Cyborg feature a character that offered inspiration to children with disabilities, but outside of these interactions, Cyborg constantly worries about his body's limitations. For Cyborg, the black body is a limitation, a weakness that needs to be discarded. By *New Teen Titans 71*, Cyborg's body is completely rebuilt, with only his face revealing his racial identity.³¹² The loss of the black body is emphasized as Cyborg's primary purpose on the Teen Titans is to serve as a figure being continually rebuilt and destroyed. Because of the mechanical body, Cyborg has frequently been dismembered and rebuilt, an act which allows villains to prove how strong and powerful they are without causing permanent damage to the Teen Titans' roster. Cyborg's eventually completely discards the black body and becomes Cyberion, a fully

³¹² Marv Wolfman and Tom Grummett, "Beginnings... Endings... And (We Promise) New Beginnings!" *Teen Titans 71*. (New York: DC Comics 1990). 9.

mechanized body.³¹³ Cyborg's slow transformation over the course of his first decade leaves a lot to be desired from a character that would become DC Comics' premiere black superhero.

Contemporary racism remains bolstered by the presentation of race and sexuality to reduce black men to solely their physical body. While Cyborg espoused white liberal politics, the character provides a representation of the desires of white supremacy upon the black body. Originally, Cyborg presents the hallmarks of the black buck stereotype and is almost entirely defined through his physical body. The fear of black male sexuality continues to be pervasive in American culture and is often codified as a threat to white women. Patricia Hill Collins writes, "white elites reduced Black men to their bodies, and identified their muscles and their penises as their most important sites."³¹⁴ Because white supremacy locates the black body as a site to be dominated, Cyborg rejects the black buck stereotype but only by rejecting his black identity. As mentioned above, Cyborg finds weakness in his black body and constantly attempts to upgrade himself. Yet, by far the most troubling aspect of the construction of Cyborg, is the attempt to make him a "safe" black man. Predominantly, the attempt to make Cyborg a "safe black man" comes through the destruction of his black body but also through his lack of sexuality.

During his tenure on the Teen Titans, Cyborg develops a relationship with two women, Sarah Simms and Dr. Sarah Charles. Sarah Simms, a young white woman that helps with the rehabilitation of young children with physical disabilities becomes a romantic fixation for Cyborg as Cyborg dates Dr. Sarah Charles, a young black woman. These relationships allowed for the opportunity to present Cyborg as a heroic black man with sexuality but result in the

³¹³ Unsurprisingly, DC eventually reversed Cyborg's Cyberion identity and returned Cyborg to his traditional outfit.

³¹⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black, Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (London: Routledge, 2005), 57.

stereotypical degradation of black women as undesirable and black men as pining after white women.

After these early romance narratives, writers shifted from the aforementioned stereotypes by completely removing Cyborg's sexuality. Early appearances of Cyborg do not clearly establish if Cyborg has genitalia, however, later comics take great pains to present Cyborg as a sexless black man. The current ongoing DC Comics series, *Justice League*, explicitly presents Cyborg's black body as only a part of his arm, torso, and head. Long before DC addressed Cyborg's physical body, Sarah Charles and Sara Simms faded from Cyborg's life and removed Cyborg's sexual identity. While various Teen Titan members progressed and hit various milestones in their lives outside of superheroics, but Cyborg becomes solely focused on his role as a Teen Titan. The black body constructed as hypersexual and animalistic is central to white narratives throughout American history. The presentation of Cyborg as solely focused on his superheroics as other teammates are married, have children, and progress in other ways not only presents the hero as a one-dimensional figure, but also ties to the long history of presenting black men as safe by removing their sexuality.

Following the removal of his love interests, Cyborg becomes fully focused on his work as a superhero. The presentation of the mechanical black body in need of constant improvement and dictated by a white liberal mindset provides a powerful reading of how unintentional white supremacy appear in comics. Certainly, Cyborg began during a period when diversity and tokenism meant the same thing, however, the years following the debut of Cyborg present a character that is more interested in the erasure of his black body than recognizing the importance of a black superhero and need for more black representation.

Tyroc: The Future Separatist

While Cyborg largely positions the black identity outside of the ghettoization of most black superheroes, DC Comics' Tyroc, introduced in *Superboy 216*, envisions the black identity in a post-racist future. Originally created to provide a hopeful future of humanity, the *Legion of Superheroes* depicts a humanity that has reached the stars and befriended new alien races. Until 1976, the humanity depicted was entirely white and the vast majority of alien species that joined the Legion of Superheroes appear to be white men and women. The few physically different humanoid characters, like Chameleon Boy, provided allegorical narratives about prejudice in the 30th century.

For years, writers and artists wanted to introduce a black character to the Legion, but DC Comics' editorial board repeatedly said no. In an interview examining the long history of the Legion, Jim Shooter said, "I always wanted to have a character who was African-American."³¹⁵ Expanding upon this line of thought, another Legion author, artists Mike Grell noted the long difficulty of attempting to introduce black characters into DC Comics because DC editor Murray Boltinoff prevented any attempt.³¹⁶ While Boltinoff would not let creators introduce new black characters, he would also demand that any black characters in the background of the books he edited be turned white.³¹⁷ The futuristic depictions of humanity were meant to provide allegorical tales of our society in the future, but the Legion remained almost exclusively white. The expansion of the *Legion of Superheroes* during Jim Shooter's era introduced popular characters

³¹⁵ Glen Cadigan, *The Legion Companion* (Raleigh, N.C.: ToMorrow Publishing, 2003), 53.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 89.

³¹⁷ Brian Cronin, *Things That Turned Out Bad - The Racially Segregated Superhero of the Future!* Comic Book Resources. August 17, 2014. Last Accessed June 28, 2019. Online: <https://www.cbr.com/things-that-turned-out-bad-the-racially-segregated-superhero-of-the-future/>

like the Karate Kid from Earth, and other alien superheroes. But, almost all of these heroes held white facial features and skin tones.

Eventually, Murray Boltinoff allowed for the introduction of a black superhero, Tyroc, but the writer Cary Bates and artist Grell found the character to be racist. Grell explains in the *Legion Companion*, “I kept getting stalled off...and finally comes Tyroc. They might as well have named him Tyrone. Their explanation for why there were no black people [in the Legion] was that all the black people had gone to live on an island. It's possibly the most racist concept I've ever heard in my life...I mean, it's a segregationist's dream, right? So they named him Tyroc, and gave him the world's stupidest super-power.”³¹⁸ A previous *Legion of Superheroes* writer, Jim Shooter, recalled that numerous DC authors wanted to introduce African American characters, but hated Tyroc, “they did it in the worst way possible... instead of just incidentally having a character who happens to be black... they made a big fuss about it. He's a racial separatist... I just found it pathetic and appalling.”³¹⁹ Grell protested the creation of Tyroc and what he felt was a racist depiction of a black superhero by providing the character with what he considered to be the “silliest costume” imaginable.³²⁰

Tyroc's introduction hints at the internal politics at play in DC Comics during the 1970s. Tyroc's introduction provides a rather patronizing tone towards the introduction of black people in the Legion of Superheroes. Similar to the decade earlier introductions of Black Panther and the Inhumans in the Fantastic Four, Tyroc's introduction provides a separatist narrative that gives way to white liberalism and color-blindness. For Grell and other authors to argue that Tyroc was a racist depiction hints that their politics skewed against the white liberalism of the era. Shooter

³¹⁸ Cadigan, 90.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 61.

³²⁰ Ibid., 90.

argued for a more white liberal narrative that featured a character that happened to be black and color-blind, but both Grell and Shooter found themselves pitted against Boltinoff's racist views, who had a long history of demanding black people be literally erased from comics he edited. Because Boltinoff's erasure of black people was so prevalent, DC Comics felt the introduction of a black character needed to be addressed and subsequently presented all black people on earth residing on the island of Marzal, located in the Mediterranean Sea.

Originally, Tyroc provides compelling arguments for why the inhabitants of Marzal distrust the Legion. The island of Marzal is "an independent, totally self-sufficient community populated entirely by a black race that wants nothing to do with the outside world."³²¹ As the Legion enters Marzal, Tyroc appears on a viewscreen and informs all of the residents that they "are not to offer them friendship."³²² During this moment, Tyroc provides compelling reasons for their distrust of white people and notes, "for the legion has ignored us! Where were they when we suffered through our energy drought or the terrible ion storm of last spring? Many times, we could've used their help... but they were always somewhere else! Is it the color of our skin that doesn't make us important enough?"³²³ From Tyroc's perspective, the Legion continually ignored the plight of Marzal to focus on the plights facing the other people of earth, all of whom are white.

Despite the sound arguments Tyroc presents, the Legion merely dismiss his arguments about the appearance of their own prejudice. As the heroes fly around Marzal, they argue "Tyroc did a good job -- brainwashing them with hatred!"³²⁴ The Legion fully expects to be greeted by

³²¹ Cary Bates and Mike Grell, "The Hero Who Hated the Legion" *Superboy and the Legion of Superheroes* 216 (New York: DC Comics, 1976), 4.

³²² *Ibid.*, 7.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 7.

³²⁴ Bates, *Superboy and the Legion of Superheroes* 216, 8.

gracious survivors, quickly forgetting their history of abandonment. But rather than address the grievances Tyroc has; the Legion saves him from some radiation poisoning. This causes Tyroc to completely change his opinion surrounding the Legion of Superheroes, “you went out of your way to save my life even though we’ve shown you nothing but hatred and contempt!”³²⁵ The story ends with a direct claim that color-blindness will solve the problems of society, as Superboy says, “when it comes to race, we’re color-blind!” and three legionnaires responding, “blue skin, yellow skin green skin...we’re brothers and sisters...united in the name of justice everywhere.”³²⁶ Unsurprisingly, Tyroc vows to follow the Legionnaire's to Metropolis and see if he can become a member of the Legion of Superheroes. Unlike other black superheroes, Tyroc provides a compelling argument against the Legionnaires, but settles for the disappointing liberal conclusion of color-blindness as a radical idea that black people simply need to hear about to solve the problems of racism.

The color-blindness the Legionnaires advocate builds upon their arguments for meritocracy in the selection of their teammates. Tyroc returns in *Superboy 218*, which opens with dejected applicants leaving Legion Citadel after failing to pass their tests.³²⁷ In order to become a superhero and join the Legion of Superheroes each candidate must pass a test showing how they would be a helpful hero to have. As Tyroc arrives at the citadel, Brainiac 5 recounts the events that occurred on Marzal and explains to the reader that none of the legion are racists, because they have a wide variety of people of different hues, though notably no one answers

³²⁵ Bates, *Superboy and the Legion of Superheroes* 216, 12.

³²⁶ Ibid., 12.

³²⁷ Two of the candidates show their respective powers. First, Infectious Lass has the ability to spread or quell disease, which one would think would be an important tool for the Legion. The other, Quake Kid, has a superpower that dozens of other characters use throughout the series.

Tyroc's actual accusation of racial discrimination against the "black race on Marzal."³²⁸ Instead of addressing the complaints Tyroc levies at the Legion, the series dismisses these complaints by rehashing color-blindness and articulating the benefits of their merit-based application to join the superhero team. The rest of the story revolves around Tyroc proving his merits to join the Legion before a rejected applicant attacks him. The rejected applicant argues that he deserves to join the Legion before Tyroc, insinuating that Tyroc joined because of Affirmative Action. The story ends with Tyroc fighting a white rejected applicant to prove he deserves to join the Legion. The moral of the comic provides a clear construction that color-blindness and meritocracy will allow for anyone to succeed and prove their worth to their peers.

Following Tyroc joining the Legion, his stories often become embroiled in tales surrounding the importance of meritocracy with the villains constructing strawman arguments against merit-based outcomes. Because the Legion is such a massive superhero team, the writers would often mix and match which characters appeared in which issue. Tyroc returns in *Superboy* 222, this time framed for attempting to destroy Metropolis. Because janitor Fenton Pyke, the villain that framed Tyroc, "couldn't qualify for the police force. He decided to exact a fortune from our city threatening to detonate the bomb he had hidden."³²⁹ The construction of meritocracy alongside their first black character provides a rhetorical narrative that oozes a white liberal self-importance to rationalize their arguments as a common-sense approach to issues of racism. The Tyroc storylines provide strawman narratives that argue for color-blind, merit-based processes. These storylines come to the forefront when anti-affirmative action and reverse

³²⁸ Cary Bates and Mike Grell. *Superboy and the Legion of Superheroes* 218 (New York: DC Comics, 1976), 4.

³²⁹ Cary Bates and Mike Grell. *Superboy and the Legion of Superheroes* 222 (New York: DC Comics, 1976), 20.

discrimination arguments began in the 1970s. Unlike the Legionaries on superhero team, Tyroc operates primarily as a rhetorical strategy to prove white liberal positionality about race in the United States.

Tyroc negates black political movements in favor of white liberal policies and operates in a white future-scape that celebrates color-blind politics. Surprisingly, the series offers a strong anti-affirmative action narrative when Tyroc becomes a member of the Legion of Superheroes. Starting as an executive order signed by President Kennedy in 1961 and expanded by President Johnson in 1965, 70% of Americans favored Affirmative Action programs by the late 1960s.³³⁰ However, Presidents Nixon and Ford articulated support for Affirmative Action, but strongly opposed the adoption of quota systems and actively argued against the notion of quotas. In the last decade, white liberals have strongly pushed against Affirmative Action programs often calling these programs “reverse discrimination” and frequently cite color-blindness as the best possible outcome.

The Legion of Superheroes provides anti-quota arguments in *Superboy 218*, as Tyroc officially joins the Legion. As mentioned above, Tyroc fights against a rejected applicant to secure his spot on the superhero roster. Normally, this storyline would merely be a banal tale of the hero proving their worth. However, since Tyroc is the first black Legionnaire, the narrative provides a reading that strongly opposes Affirmative Action policies and argues for the return of merit-based acceptance. The rejected applicant, Absorbency Boy, earnestly believes that Tyroc took his place on the Legion of Superheroes. While Tyroc’s race is never mentioned as the cause, the images of a white boy complaining about a black boy taking his spot of acceptance insinuates an obvious political storyline. Rather than point out that Tyroc represents a community that has

³³⁰ Terry Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness: A History of Affirmative Action*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 74.

long been ignored by the Legion, as mentioned in *Superboy 216*, the Legion has Tyroc fight the rejected applicant to secure his spot on the team.

Perhaps most distressing, in an effort to create tension in the storyline, the reader is expected to question whether Tyroc really does deserve a place on the superhero team. Over the course of the final issue, Absorbency Boy makes a strong case for why he should be allowed on the superhero team. Absorbency Boy can use the superpowers of those around him and duplicates the powers of Superboy. Rather than let both capable heroes on the team, the Legion continues to nonsensically argue that there can be only one spot on the team. The anti-Affirmative Action narrative argues that the best, no matter their race, should be given the spot on the Legion of Superheroes. Similarly, white liberals often argue in favor of color-blind hiring processes to allow for the best applicant to be hired but fail to acknowledge implicit bias and unconscious racism.

Despite the problems of Tyroc, the island of Marzal hints at past racial atrocities committed against black bodies and the desire to live a separatist life. The DC Comics revealed the history and foundation of Marzal in *Issue 265*, “the Brigadoon Syndrome.” Set in the 17th century, St’Balla fakes his death and when he is freed from his shackles, he leads a slave rebellion against the enslavers. During this rebellion, the ship becomes caught in a tempest that washes the survivors onto the shore of Marzal. Shortly after the arrival of St’Balla and the other escaped slaves, the island of Marzal shifts to another dimension. Tyroc explains, “what my people soon realized was that -- for a period of three decades -- every two hundred years -- Marzal appears in the real world -- only to vanish again like the legendary Scottish town of

Brigadoon.”³³¹ The society of Marzal flourishes, born out of a slave rebellion, provides the template for a powerful Afrofuturist narrative.

The issue examines the compelling construction of a new black society without the influence of Western colonialism or imperialism, but the aesthetic choices like clothing argues a naturalism of Western civilization. As Tyroc explains the history of these people, characters briefly shown of Marzal’s past wear traditional 19th century suits and gowns rather than developing their own clothing. Furthermore, Tyroc continues to espouse Western liberalism as he recounts Marzal’s history, noting, “Marzal grew as the outerworld grew -- discovering the ways of civilization--of hard work.”³³² Tyroc continues to root Marzal in the modern cultural values of liberalism, while arguing that his people discovered civilization, rather than noting that they already had one. This issue draws comparison to the introduction of the Black Panther in *Fantastic Four 52*, as both feature a high-tech African civilization only briefly touched by Western colonialism that was quickly rebuked. But, despite being released more than a decade after Black Panther’s debut, “The Brigadoon Syndrome” largely constructs Marzal through the racist assumptions of African civilizations, rather than against it like Lee and Kirby’s groundbreaking series.

Blade: The Techno-Vampire

Most Afrofuturist portrayals present the black body within a futuristic technological framework, however, equally important Afrofuturist aesthetic involves the insertion of the black body into the fantasy and horror narrative, which historically is defined by whiteness. By

³³¹ Gerry Conway, J.M. DeMatteis, and Jim Janes, “The Brigadoon Syndrome!” *Legion of Super-Heroes vol. 2* 265 (New York: DC Comics, 1980), 12.

³³² *Ibid.*, 12.

bringing blackness into these narratives, Afrofuturism tempers the white and colonial narratives embedded in fantasy and horror genres and often introduces African mythology into these narratives. Introduced in 1973, the black vampire hunter Blade became an iconic figure in Marvel's fantasy and horror comics, *Tomb of Dracula*. Originally conceived during the Blaxploitation period of comics, Blade operates outside of the traditional superhero genre, but adhered to the urban stereotypes of black heroes. When the popularity of Blaxploitation narratives waned, Blade became firmly rooted in the fantasy narrative as a globetrotting vampire hunter. Unlike Cyborg, whiteness held a direct role in the construction of Blade's post-humanity, as a half-vampire. Because the cultural imagination of Dracula is defined by European whiteness, Blade operated as a unique black hero fighting against a dangerous and violent whiteness.³³³

Despite being a half-vampire from London, Blade fell into many of the stereotypical characterizations of the black hero. In the first story focused solely on Blade, the author uses the South Bronx to characterize the dangers Blade faces despite Blade not having a connection to America: "she used to be something special, years ago, you can die just as easily in London as in the South Bronx."³³⁴ During the 1970s, the South Bronx became a symbol of "urban decay" and poverty in America. Five years after this comic, President Reagan would characterize the Bronx as an "urban blight," a term which has long held racial connotations and used by local governments to condemn areas dominated by racial and ethnic minorities. Interestingly, President Reagan would also compare the South Bronx to London in his speech.³³⁵ Narratively,

³³³ Admittedly the vampire narrative derives from anti-immigrant sentiments, specifically against Eastern European men.

³³⁴ Chris Claremont, "The Night Josie Harper Died!" *Marvel Preview Presents 3* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1975), 4.

³³⁵ Jill Jones, *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 31.

Claremont's comparison feels out of place because Blade is not from the Bronx or America, instead he was born in Soho. Claremont uses the comparison as a dog whistle to inform the reader "how far London has fallen" that it is equitable to the Bronx, though the problems London faces are fantastical rather than white flight and poverty.

In *Tomb of Dracula*, Blade adheres to the angry black man stereotype that dominated Blaxploitation characters. These depictions relied upon hypermasculinity and presented Blade as little more than an angry black man relentlessly pursuing Dracula. *Tomb of Dracula 10* provides little information outside of the hero besides his name and profession: "They call me Blade! Blade-- the vampire killer."³³⁶ Unlike the white vampire hunters, Blade makes no distinction in who he kills as Harker, the primary protagonist of *Tomb of Dracula*, chastises Blade for murdering a vampire that was "only a child," to which Blade responds, "frankly, I don't give a flying hoot! He was a stinkin' vampire-- an' better off dead!"³³⁷ Harker chastises Blade's short sightedness, arguing that the heroes can no longer track Dracula. Harker's opposition to Blade reinforced the hero as an angry black man stereotype and the issue provides almost no characterization outside of Blade's anger and his desire to kill Dracula.

Despite the issues of early Blade comics, the author, Marv Wolfman, intentionally developed Blade against the typical black urban hero. Blade's development occurred because Marv Wolfman was not happy with this characterization. In an interview, Wolfman said, "I also wasn't happy with my Blade dialogue, so I pulled him out of the book for a while — I think almost a year — and when I brought him back I played him a bit straighter. The early Blade

³³⁶ Marv Wolfman and Gene Colon, "His name is... Blade!" *Tomb of Dracula 10* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1973), 2.

³³⁷ Ibid., 6.

dialogue was cliché ‘Marvel Black’ dialogue. Later on, I tried to make him more real.”³³⁸

Wolfman, the creator of Cyborg, intentionally shifted Blade from the dialogue which defined a lot of Marvel’s early black comic book characters, like Luke Cage. This shift brought Blade from Blaxploitation into a proto-Afrofuturist fantasy series. After Blade is reintroduced, the hero shifts from the typical urban setting to a globetrotting vampire hunter. No longer limited to London or other cities, Blade hunts vampires on mountain sides and crumbling castles.

The white villains provide new reading of the black hero and encodes aristocratic whiteness and imperialism as evil. Historically, vampire narratives presented ethnically marked men, often marked through foreign accents, preying upon white women. Blade reverses this narrative by featuring a racially marked hero defending racially diverse women, though mostly white, from white men. Because the cultural imagination of vampires remains pale white men, Blade abandons the 19th century fears of Eastern European immigrants for the simple presentation of white men as vampires. Since Dracula and other vampires do not have accented speech, the comic only presents them as wealthy white men. Furthermore, outside of Dracula the predominant villains Blade fights are the Legion of the Undead. The Legion of Undead are British aristocratic vampires that plan to conquer the world. The Legion of the Undead capitalizes on the British aristocracy’s colonial and imperialist history, though they desire to subjugate anyone who is not a vampire. The repeated narrative arc features a black man fighting against vampire imperialists.

Blade’s origin as a post-human figure acknowledges the role of whiteness in the construction of black trauma. Born in 1929, Blade’s mother works as a prostitute, and a vampire bites her while she gives birth to Blade. Unlike Cyborg, Blade’s circumstances are not the fault

³³⁸ Robert Greenberger, "Inside the Tomb of Dracula". *Marvel Spotlight: Marvel Zombies Return*. (New York: Marvel Comics, 2009), 28.

of his mother but entirely the culpability of the white vampire, Deacon Frost.³³⁹ Due to complications with the pregnancy, the Madam calls for a doctor to treat Blade's mother. The doctor, Deacon Frost, bites Blade's mother before the other women drive him out of the brothel. The narrative of a white man destroying black bodies under the guise of helping them places the trauma Blade experiences upon white men. Like most comic book heroes, Blade's trauma stems from his parents, and his origin provides a fantastical twist on the role of whiteness and black trauma. Similar to enslaved women raped by white slaveholders or black women raped by white men in the Jim Crow south, the origin emphasizes the non-consensual penetration of a black woman by a white man. The role of vampires as rapists is not a new reading of the vampire horror subgenre, but Blade underscores the racialized reading of the vampire as a wealthy white man with distinct racial and class privilege over his victims.

As the series progresses, Blade's trauma parallels the long history of racialized violence and trauma in the United States. Other vampires, all of whom provide visible whiteness, protect Deacon Frost from Blade. Despite his British heritage, Blade shifts into a US southern narrative with the re-emergence of Deacon Frost as a southern preacher.³⁴⁰ As Blade confronts Frost, the series provides relatively striking imagery of a traditionally dressed white southerner gleefully acknowledging the violence done to black bodies. In these moments, Blade presents white Southern fears about black violence on former slave owners in the south. Further, vampire lore provides prominent allegories to the enslaved black people who were raped by slave owners and the children produced. Vampire narratives often invoke ties to rape and birth through their use of language. For instance, a new vampire is "sired," and as Blade fights through the hordes of

³³⁹ Chris Claremont and Rico Rival, "Dawn of Blood!" *Marvel Preview Presents 3* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1975), 38.

³⁴⁰ Ian Edington and Doug Wheatley, "The Bad to the Bone" *Blade 7* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1995), 12.

Deacon Frosts' legitimate "children," they all refuse to acknowledge Blade's connection to Frost. Many scholars have examined the role of the wife of slave owners, their relationships with their husbands enslaved children, and how these women have been presented in the media. This reading of Blade provides a damning critique of the Southern family as vampires. While Morbius, a genetically modified vampire, would not bite Blade until 1998, the 1970s series *Tomb of Dracula* emphasize questions of heritage facing the black diaspora and the people who were stolen from their ancestral home. Because of his mother's death in childbirth, Blade's lacks any avenue to seeks answers about his black heritage and others refuse to acknowledge his vampiric heritage leaving Blade as a figure severed from his ancestors.

After *Tomb of Dracula* concluded in 1979, Blade shifts firmly into Afrofuturism with the new Blade book, *the Nightstalkers*. In an attempt to revitalize Marvel horror heroes, Blade joins the Nightstalkers, a group of vampire hunters notably featuring Drake and Hannibal King. In *Nightstalkers*, Blade focused less on his own personal trauma and more on fighting dangerous fantastical creatures and the occult with the aid of futuristic weaponry and technology. In *Tomb of Dracula*, Blade almost exclusively teak daggers, now the used guns that shot silver bullets, laser weapons that harnessed sunlight, and whatever else the author could imagine. Blade still existed in a fantasy and horror setting, but now operated in a space that allowed the imaginative futuristic portrayal of Afrofuturism. This depiction would become the basis for the 1998 film *Blade* starring Wesley Snipes. The film would prove to be so popular that Marvel's depiction of Blade continues to bear striking similarities to the Wesley Snipes' version.

Despite the importance of Blade as an Afrofuturist character and relatively progressive narrative that highlights the role of whiteness in black trauma, Marvel still neuters Blade. While Cyborg is neutered through the literal castration of his body, Marvel neutered Blade removing all

sexuality from the character. Because Blade's overt hypermasculinity could be perceived as the black buck stereotype, Blade becomes a safe hypermasculine black hero through the removal of his sexuality. Originally, the writers introduced Blade with his girlfriend, Saffron, a young African American woman. Saffron's purpose in Blade is little more than a damsel in distress, once the character dies in *Marvel Presents*, Blade becomes engulfed in his desire for vengeance, and eschews any display of sexuality. The construction of Blade as a hypermasculine figure can only be combated removing the sexuality of the hero, building upon the stereotype of the dangerous black male sexuality. The role of black men perceived as safe through the lack of sexuality allowed for Marvel to construct a long running black hero that became less human over the course of his comic. Like Cyborg, Blade slowly becomes defined by his fantastical identity rather than his black one. By 1998, Marvel decided to push Blade's vampire background to the forefront of the series and has yet to explore his identity as a black man.

The construction of faux-Afrofuturist characters allowed for comic book publishers to position new black heroes that often wrested with their own identity outside of the stereotypical blaxploitation hero. However, the comic book publishers continued push to emphasize white liberal political messages often emphasized racial biases in these comic book characters. Both Blade and Cyborg slowly become enveloped by their fantastical identity, and Tyroc argues for merit-based applications as a means to solve racism. Simply put, the faux-Afrofuturist superheroes never explored their racial identity except to reinforce white liberal ideology.

Rewriting History: Egyptian Iconography and Violence

I conclude my analysis of the application of an Afrofuture aesthetic through the comic book industry's dichotomy of Egyptian iconography against a white modernity. Afrofuturism

applies Egyptian iconography as a signifier for a non-European culture in the imagined futuristic society, which is important as even diverse futurist societies are still presented through a white Eurocentric lens. However, comic books often used Egyptian iconography as not only antagonistic to the white liberal perspective but often links the civilization to an extraterrestrial or mystical origin. Because the superhero represents white liberal values, comic books often presented the Egyptian themed hero as mitigating these Egyptian, supernatural forces that desired to overwhelm the hero's Western values, often represented through their "no killing" rule. Egyptian themed villains became antagonistic colonizers intent on destroying Western society and rebuilding the world in their image. Both the heroes and villains presented the non-Eurocentric Egyptian aesthetic as a corrupting influence of white liberal society.

Introduced in 1940, Hawkman and Hawkgirl are some of the first Egyptian themed heroes in comics and presently appear in DC series like *Justice League* and other comics. Both Hawkman and Hawkgirl appeared in back-up stories in *Flash Comics* as Carter Hall and Shiera Sanders, the reincarnated star-crossed lovers Prince Khufu and Shiera. The two would be reintroduced in the 1960s as reimagined police aliens from the planet Thanagar and changed their names to Karter and Shayera Hol. In an attempt to merge the two versions of the characters, DC crudely presented Hawkman and Hawkgirl as alien reincarnations of Egyptian royalty. By the end of the 1980s, the characters were peripheral figures that offered a confusing backstory for most readers. However, throughout their different interpretations, DC presents their characterization as ruthless fighters with an eagerness for bloodshed compared to their teammates on the Justice League. Despite both being white and occasionally alien, DC Comics excused Hawkman and Hawkgirl's violence as a part of their Egyptian past lives.

Similarly, Doctor Fate presents an Egyptian identity as violent to foreground an internal struggle between a white modernity and a barbaric mysticism. Since Doctor Fate debuted in 1940, there have been numerous characters that have taken on the mantel and namesake of Doctor Fate. But each new character must internally battle with the ancient sorcerer Nabu, who imbues the character with his power through an ancient helm. Historically, Babylonians worshiped Nabu the Wise, and he did eventually spread to parts of Egypt. In Doctor Fate's backstory, Nabu the Wise provided counsel to powerful pharaohs and battled the evil magical forces of chaos. The Helmet of Nabu, allows for the wearer to talk with Nabu and channel his power. When a character puts the helmet on, Nabu becomes capable of possessing them and frequently battles for control with the wearer of the helmet. While both Nabu and the wearer desire to punish criminals and seek justice, Nabu desires to punish criminals by murdering them. The characterization of Nabu presents his goals as out of sync with a modern sense of justice, presenting his Egyptian identity as a barbaric punitive system that threatens to overwhelm the white liberal hero.

Hawkman, Hawkgirl, and Doctor Fate provide depictions of Egyptian culture as not only violent and destructive but as an ancient barbarism. However, these depictions began prior to the beginning of the Afrofuturist movement with Sun-Ra. Instead, these depictions points towards the comic book industry's positioning of non-Eurocentric culture as incompatible with white liberal values. The internal war of Doctor Fate or the Hawks questioning their teammates' actions continue to be used today. The construction of this incompatibility becomes further entrenched with the creation of 1970s and 1980s comic book characters like Moon Knight, a Marvel superhero, and the villains the Living Monolith and Apocalypse.

Moon Knight, a Marvel superhero, constructs the mesh of Egyptian identity and Western values as a division of identity manifested through mental illness. Marc Spector, a mercenary, is mortally wounded by his mercenary boss, Bushman, when Spector refuses to commit genocide against the local tribes. Mortally wounded, the local Egyptians take Marc to a statue of Khonshu, who appears to Marc in a vision.³⁴¹ Realizing the mistakes of his mercenary past, Marc returns the United States and begins a one-man war on crime.

Like Doctor Fate, Khonshu provides a violent influence on Marc's white Western sensibilities. Despite being a mercenary and committing acts of violence for money throughout Africa, Marc's still presented as the sensible personality in his interactions with the violent Egyptian god. While talking to Marlene, his love interest in the series, Marc argues that Moon Knight is a separate personality from himself or the other personas he has adopted to fight crime, "Moon Knight is a pure primal force stripped of emotion, a being who can get the job done without conflicting feelings."³⁴² While other superheroes exist with dual identities, Moon Knight frequently articulates the characters as completely different people rather than extensions of each other, "there's a big difference-- which is why Moon Knight exists. Me, Lockley, and even Marc Spector are too normal capable of too much emotion... including fear." Embedded with superhuman abilities, the series describes Moon Knight as a primal force incapable of emotion that only desires to dole out justice, which often takes a form of unrepentant violence.

Unlike other superheroes, *Moon Knight* argues Marc's mind has become fractured due to Khonshu's influence and developed four distinct personalities: Marc Spector, Steven Grant, Jake Lockley, and Moon Knight. While describing Moon Knight as a primal force, two other

³⁴¹ Doug Moench and Bill Sienkiewicz, "The Macabre Moon Knight" *Moon Knight 1* (Marvel Comics: New York, 1980), 9.

³⁴² Doug Moench and Bill Sienkiewicz, "The Slasher" *Moon Knight 2* (Marvel Comics: New York, 1980), 10.

personalities emerge in the early *Moon Knight* series: Steven Grant, “whose wall street wizardry parlays Spector’s modest savings into a millionaire’s fortune; and Jake Lockley, “a street smart cabbie who hears everything!”³⁴³ While Marlene, his love interest, says that these different personalities are “all in his mind,” she refers to the different personalities by their names, calling him Steven when they’re at the billionaire estate. For fans of the series, this created an interesting dynamic to wonder if these different personalities were all an elaborate act or if four distinct men lived in Marc Spector’s body following his interactions with Khonshu. Mental health became central to the construction of Moon Knight in later issues with the cause being the character’s interaction with Khonshu and Egyptian culture.

Despite their connections to Egyptian culture, Hawkman, Hawkgirl, Dr. Fate, and Moon Knight are all white characters from America. Each character’s interactions with Egyptian culture hinge upon a fractured identity between the depictions of a modern white Western “civilization” and an ancient Egyptian “barbarism.” However, these characters appeared prior to the rise of Afrofuturism in the 1980s, but Egyptian iconography continues to be prominently placed in the expansion of black superheroes during this period.

While Blade and Cyborg provided new frontiers for blackness to appear in comics, the development of the X-Men villains, Living Monolith and Apocalypse appear to be reactionary vilifications of Afrofuture aesthetic. Introduced in 1969, The Living Monolith provides a strange reading of the use of Egyptian iconography, the supervillain, and turning black. Similarly, Apocalypse, introduced during Louise Simonson’s *X-Factor* series, would use Egyptian iconography and Afrofuture aesthetic as part of their villainous backstory. Unlike the Living Monolith, Apocalypse would become one of the most popular and menacing comic book

³⁴³ Moench, *Moon Knight 1*, 15.

villains. Despite these differences, both heavily draw upon Egyptian iconography as a non-normative and unenlightened alternative to the white Western ideology of the X-Men.

Before he became the Living Monolith, Ahmet Abdol was the Living Pharaoh, an X-Man villain that wanted to absorb the powers of certain mutants and turn into the Living Monolith, a powerful foe. Despite appearing white, Ahmet's backstory presented the character as an Egyptian and a modern descendant of Egyptian "royal blood."³⁴⁴ Like most villains in the X-Men, the Living Pharaoh leaves much to be desired in the assumptions of Egyptian identity. While the character dresses in traditional Egyptian garments including a shendyt, a green khepresh headdress, and wields an ankh as a club, the characterization of the Living Pharaoh appears to be distinctly taken from Western stereotypical assumptions about Islam. While the Living Pharaoh worships the god Ra, he refers to Western characters as "infidels" which repeatedly conflates the character's Arabic identity with Muslim stereotypes. Jehanzeb Dar's *Holy Islamophobia, Batman!* Highlights the comic book industry's long assumption of Arab as a synonym for Muslim and the problematic presentation of these groups of people.³⁴⁵ As Dar notes, the presentation of the Living Pharaoh fits with the presentation of Arab men as oppressors.

The Living Pharaoh presents Egyptian culture as antithetical to the white liberal modernity, and Marvel presents Egypt's civilization as mishmash of religious cults and a dismissal of accepted scientific thought. The Living Pharaoh, a mutant, argues that his powers derive from his faithfulness to Ra and forms a religious cult devoted to the Living Pharaoh's

³⁴⁴ Arnold Drake and Werner Roth, "Wanted Dead or Alive... Cyclops!" *Uncanny X-Men* 54 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1969), 4.

³⁴⁵ Jehanzeb Dar, "Holy Islamophobia, Batman! Demonization of Muslims and Arabs in Mainstream Comic Books" *Counterpoints* vol 346. pg. 99-110.

ascension, a ritual that will transform him into the Living Monolith.³⁴⁶ Despite other character's religious beliefs, the Living Pharaoh is the only mutant to dismiss their mutant identity and claim to be anointed by a god. This characterization presents the Living Pharaoh and Egyptian culture outside of modernity. Not only does the Living Pharaoh dismiss the commonly understood identity of mutants, but his characterization roots his Egyptian identity firmly into the past religious customs of ancient Egypt. In a series that frequently revolves around the emergence of mutants and their evolutionary abilities, The Living Pharaoh provides a stark contrast in his refusal to acknowledge this evolution.

The Living Pharaoh narrative positions Egyptian culture as a corrupting influence upon the white body. While the Living Pharaoh is white, after performing a ritual and consuming the powers of the X-Man Havok, the Living Pharaoh transforms into the Living Monolith, an ashen colored villain. Through this ancient Egyptian ritual, the Living Pharaoh transforms into a black monstrous creature with glowing eyes intent on conquering the world. The transformation of a white man into a black monstrosity ties to the role of Egyptian culture, or non-western culture in general, as a corrupting desire to conquer the world.

This presentation of Egyptian culture as not only violent but imperialist derives from the racialized villain in comics. Originally Apocalypse was the shadowy leader of the Alliance of Evil, he became so popular with fans that Marvel made him the focus of the *X-Factor* series. Originally appearing in *X-Factor* 5, Apocalypse remains mostly obscured and explains for his desire to have only the fittest survive. Visually, the shadowy version of the character does not match the eventual reveal of the character in the following issue, *X-Factor* 6.³⁴⁷ Originally, the

³⁴⁶ Arnold Drake and Werner Roth, "What is... the Power?" *Uncanny X-Men* 56 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1969), 11.

³⁴⁷ Louise Simonson and Jackson Guice, "Apocalypse Now!" *X-Factor* 6 (New York: Marvel Comics, 1986), 6.

leader of the Alliance of Evil was meant to be the tertiary character Owl, a Daredevil villain. However, after taking over X-Factor with *issue 6*, Simonson felt that there needed to be a new character introduced who would be a considerable threat to the superhero team. Jackson Guice, the artist of *issue 5*, quickly redrew the panel featuring the Owl and shaded over the character leaving a shadowy outline and clenched fist.³⁴⁸

The debut of Apocalypse represents the endgame of violence and Egyptian imagery. Commonly referred to as the first mutant, Apocalypse exists from a time long forgotten and desires to remake the modern world in his own horrific image. The storyline from *Age of Apocalypse* provides the most widely read narrative of Apocalypse's vision, but other storylines position his Egyptian heritage as a brutalist and violent culture where only the strongest survive.

Like other Egyptian character, Apocalypse flirts with Afrofuturism. Born En Sabah Nur to a fictional clan in the Valley of the Kings, Apocalypse discovers a crashed alien spaceship. Using the technology and his mutant abilities, he transforms himself into the blue monstrosity most are familiar with. However, while most Afrofuturist tales attempt to bring forth and highlight non-Eurocentric cultures, Apocalypse's desire to bring forth his own culture requires an imperialist background that centers on ruling the world. The presentation of a foreign culture as imperialist allows for the X-Men and other superheroes, predominantly white men, to act as global protectors and liberators rather than enacting their own imperialism. This narrative continues to play out on the global stage, as the narrative surrounding US Empire often presents it as a bumbling unintentional actor.

³⁴⁸ Jerome Maida, "Louise Simonson Discusses the creation of Apocalypse" *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. May 27, 2016. Online: https://www.inquirer.com/philly/entertainment/20160527_Louise_Simonson_discusses_the_creation_of_Apocalypse.html

The construction of Egypt as a violent and corrupting culture stems from the belief of American culture as a pure and innocent. The construction of Egypt, a non-western culture, as corrupt positions American liberalism and Western Culture as moral. The obvious racism embedded in this narrative aside, this narrative extends to Afrofuturist narratives to argue that non-western cultures are both ancient and inherently violent.

Conclusions

The incorporation of Afrofuturist themes in black superhero comics provides an important growth in the comic book industry. This moment shifts the African American superhero out of the stereotypical ghetto depiction, however, this step forward was mitigated by white liberalism. The introduction of Cyborg provides a compelling character reading of disability. However, Cyborg also spends decades eliminating his black identity, and alleviating white guilt by providing a perverse rewriting of black identity in America society through his relationship with his father. Similarly, Tyroc became a character hindered by the adoption of white liberal color-blind philosophy, intended to operate first as a token argument against Affirmative Action in the Legion of Superheroes. Despite DC Comics' problems attempting to incorporate Afrofuturism into their comics, Marvel found not only a popular character, but a positive depiction of the Afrofuturist character in Blade. While far from perfect, Blade used the mythology of vampires to explore the toll of white supremacy on the black body. The use of the monstrous and grotesque in these Afrofuturist narratives provides a mixed bag of positive and negative depictions of popular black superheroes. While Cyborg desired to eliminate his black identity, Blade sought to destroy those that had murdered his ancestors.

Despite the mixed bag of Afrofuturist superheroes, both Marvel and DC Comics have largely depicted the symbolism of non-Western power, primarily defined through Egyptian iconography in Afrofuturism, as little more than barbarism. The purpose of Egyptian influence seems to primarily be juxtaposed with white Western values, which in superhero comics are almost entirely defined through white liberalism. The trend of eroding Egyptian society began prior to the popularity of early Afrofuturism in the 1970s and 1980s but became continually reinforced through the incorporation of superheroes like Moon Knight and Doctor Fate as well as villains like the Living Monolith and Apocalypse. Ultimately, both black superheroes and the use of Egyptian Afrofuturist symbolism hinged upon establishing white liberalism and Western values. This safeness was predicated on the black superhero embracing white color-blind narratives which extolled the importance of American culture while belittling African and other non-Western cultures.

Epilogue:

Into the Spider-Diverse

In 2010, Marvel Comics killed Peter Parker, Spider-Man, and replaced him with Miles Morales, an Afrolatino superhero. Marvel slowly rolled out Miles under the writing credits of their most prolific and popular writer, Brian Michael Bendis. For Marvel in 2010, Miles represented the fulfillment of white liberalism. The decision to kill Peter Parker and feature a new Spider-Man stemmed from a desire to highlight a post-racial America following the election of Barack Obama in 2008.³⁴⁹ Marvel was not alone; for many people Obama represented the beginning of a post-racial society that white liberalism had promised since the 1960s. Yet, Barack Obama found himself beset with racist rhetoric and conspiracy theories like birtherism. Like Barack Obama's presidency, Miles Morales appeared to promise a post-racial society, but gave way to vicious racist rhetoric. As one fan wrote, "Peter Parker could not be whiter. A black boy under the mask just don't look right. This opens a whole new story line with a whole new set of problems. Who is going to believe a black man in a mask is out for the good of man kind?"³⁵⁰ This moment has led to Marvel finally shifting outside of white liberalism and the dreams of a post-racial society.

A vast majority of this dissertation focuses on critiquing and criticizing comics from decades prior with a current lens. The justification for this approach is mostly rooted in the narrative that Marvel and DC Comics continue to perpetuate. This narrative is one of corporate self-congratulation for minimal effort. Both Marvel and DC Comics articulated their progressive

³⁴⁹ Brian Truitt, "Half-black, Half-Hispanic Spider-Man Revealed." *USA Today* 2 Aug. 2011. Print. http://www.usatoday.com/life/comics/2011-08-01-black-spider-man_n.htm

³⁵⁰ Cynthia Wright, "Backlash to Black-Latino Spiderman Indicates We're Not Living in a Post-Racial Society" *madamenoire.com*. Published: 8/3/11. Accessed: 3/31/12. <http://madamenoire.com/110662/backlash-to-black-latino-spiderman-indicates-were-not-a-post-racial-society>

values for the inclusion of women, characters of color, and lately gay and lesbian identities in their comics. But, as mentioned in the introduction, visibility is not liberation, and often these characters presented harmful stereotypes as character traits. Worse, both Marvel and DC's centrist politics framed black radicalism and leftist politics and the leftist equivalent of the KKK that black characters needed to denounce to become superheroes.

This flawed comparison aside; the primary problem of white liberalism is that it often denies the real lived experiences of people of color. By emphasizing a post-racial society and limited racism to merely prejudice and bigotry, white liberalism finds itself at odds with how a majority of people of color experience racism e.g. institutional racism.³⁵¹ Because racism is systemic, white liberalism provides an inherently flawed framework.

The whiteness became central to the liberal framework offered in comics since Stan Lee and Jack Kirby found success with the Fantastic Four in 1963. Since the beginning of the superhero genre with *Action Comics I*, liberalism has always been a significant part of the superhero framework. The superhero exemplifies the notions of individualism and often promotes the idea of the government protecting the people. Superman, the first superhero, was an FDR Democrat that raced to stop the execution of a wrongfully convicted criminal in the first issue and destroyed the car of a robber baron. Whiteness became central to the liberal politics following the Civil Rights Movement, when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby wanted to continue to provide liberal political perspectives through the metaphor of the superhero. The Lee and Kirby era infused white liberalism's messages of tolerance, albeit a flawed message that often called for assimilation to American hegemony. Admittedly, the 1960s messages of tolerance appears on

³⁵¹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 4th Edition. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 8.

the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, a time when outright racism continued to be prevalent in American society.³⁵² However, these colorblind messages continued to dominate Marvel's narrative for the next half-century and allow for corporate self-aggrandizement about their legacy.

For a vast majority of scholars, black superheroes provide a mixed bag of powerful imagery and racist stereotypes. A reading of these characters leads to the conclusion that black superheroes are a mixed bag of good and bad representations that provided important visibility to young children of color. Black superheroes have simultaneously provided both painfully racist assumptions and powerful anti-racist narratives. Almost all past scholars have concluded that black superheroes provided the important first step of visibility in the medium. However, this argument often conflates visibility with inclusion. Instead of settling for visibility, I attempt to pull apart how these characters operate and often deride black political thought.

Rather than merely celebrate the inclusion of black superheroes, this dissertation examines how black superheroes were used by white authors to advance white liberal political perspectives. A vast majority of scholarship and discussion of black superheroes examines the powerful iconography of the black superhero. This iconography is important, and visibility eventually leads to inclusion, but examine early black superheroes cannot merely celebrate visibility, especially when this visibility misrepresents black radical political movements. Instead, I expand on Toni Morrison's call in *Playing in the Dark* and consider how black superheroes were used in the medium by white authors. By recognizing the limitations of these early black heroes and not settling for visibility, we can begin to celebrate the shift towards

³⁵² While I believe and would argue that racism has continued to be prevalent throughout American history, from the white liberal perspective, racism only exists in small pockets and became completely unacceptable in American society and culture.

Marvel and DC's inclusion of comics written, drawn, and created by Black authors. One such shift, was in the 1990s, when Dwayne McDuffie and other black comic creators founded Milestone Comics. Milestone Comics created notable black superheroes like Icon and Static Shock and eventually leased these characters to DC Comics.

This dissertation expands upon the legacy of black superheroes and their importance in American cultural iconography, but also notes how whiteness often becomes the defining trait in these narratives. While the purpose of the black superhero was to introduce diversity into an almost exclusively white medium, the black superhero often became defined through their lack of whiteness. White authors, artists, and editors not only directly compared their black heroes to the longstanding white superheroes, but also infused their black heroes with centrist white liberal politically messages that defined the black superhero. The black superhero became defined by their respectability and their respectability became defined through their adherence to white liberalism and rejection of black radicalism.

Scholars have spent considerable time examining superheroes, authors, artists, and the larger comic book industry, but white liberalism embedded in the genre is overlooked. Part of this is due to the hegemonic structures of white liberalism which has positioned the perspective as "default" and allows for an individual to claim an absence of political messaging. Because of the hidden nature of white liberalism, the black superhero provided two key aspects for this research. First, the black superhero provides an inherent rupture in the comic book industry. White authors did not know how to write black identities hence the decision to draw heavily on blaxploitation narratives with the debut of early black superheroes. Second, while this rupture is available in most superheroes of color, there continues to exist minimal characters of color in comics. Representation continues to be underwhelming for non-black characters of color.

Because of these limitations, this examination of black superheroes provides larger implications about how the comic book industry defaults towards white liberalism in an attempt to situate themselves as non-political.

Because of white liberalism's default perspective, the black superhero espouses these politics when removed from an American historical context. The choice to feature Black superheroes as outsiders of an American context creates a narrative where the Civil Rights Movement, four hundred years of Slavery, and hundreds of years as second-class citizens no longer mattered. Each black superhero seems to have a moment where they confront a lone racist, never encounter bigotry again, and find success as superheroes. Similarly, this narrative bears a striking resemblance to the white liberal belief that "if blacks would just stop thinking about the past, work hard, and complain less then Americans of all hues could "all get along.""³⁵³ Most black superheroes are able to forget about this past because their entire perspective is rooted in a white liberal lens.

The various character archetypes each reflect this line of thought throughout their comic book history by separating black superheroes from the American historical and cultural context. Blaxploitation characters, like Luke Cage, are positioned as outsiders of the black communities they operate in. The outsider narrative is frequently used in comics, but these characters often have familial connections that ground them to their location. Peter Parker has Aunt May, even the famed orphan Batman has his butler Alfred. Yet, Black superheroes often hold no connection to the location they operate in, positioning them without any connection to the location they operate in. Consider Luke Cage's supporting cast, Dr. Claire Temple and Noah Burstein. Claire is a love interest and Burstein is Cage's former captor and torturer. The traditional familial ties

³⁵³ Bonilla-Silva, 1.

are completely severed for Luke. While Cage originally presents a more radical understanding of racialized difference and its economic ostracization, the waning interest in Blaxploitation meant that authors shifted Luke to a more traditional superhero status and drove him into arguments of respectability.

After Luke Cage, the next wave of black superheroes were completely removed from an American cultural context which positioned them outside of the history of racism. This choice not only removed the African American superhero from America but positioned their identity outside of the African American context which allowed for the hero to be constructed as American, and, at times, even broader moniker: human. This decision allowed for African American superheroes to be constructed without the baggage of American racism. When the Falcon encounters racism it stems from temporally displaced Nazis on an island, conveniently forgetting that white supremacy drove many Americans into supporting the Nazi regime. Similarly, any reading of John Stewart as a potential Black Radical in his debut becomes negated by shifting the hero to interplanetary conflicts light years away from Earth.

At the same time, black superheroes from around the globe emigrated to America. The most popular, Storm, became a symbol for how assimilation equated strength and enlightenment. Storm's identity shifted from a neophyte to a powerful black woman was facilitated through her assimilation to American cultural values. As a caveat, Storm does offer an important and at the time one of the few depictions of a black woman as powerful. But the X-Men series emphasized her Americanization and subsequently rendered her powerless and literally turned her into a child, two problematic moments that allow for white men to retake leadership positions. Behind the scenes, Black Panther highlighted how Marvel Comics favored white comfortability. Don McGregor's *Jungle Action* provided radical narratives that upended the white liberalism and

focused on an almost entirely black cast. But white comfort won out as Marvel demanded more white characters. McGregor's choice to include the Klan incorporates the actual threats black bodies faced in America. Unfortunately and unsurprisingly, Marvel canceled the comic. This choice to cancel *Jungle Action* underscores that white liberalism places white comfort at the forefront of its ideological decisions rather than address racism in America.

White comfortability and the desire to ease white guilt became the overriding narrative choice when comic book companies began to introduce the final characterization, the black protector. Caught in horrific accidents, most of these characters found their circumstances and violence committed against them to stem from black parental figures. Blade, a superhero that debuted in horror comics, subverted this trend. The most egregious, Cyborg, provided the troubling narrative that depicted Black parentage as an inherent source of trauma. For white heroes, the death of the parent serves as a moment of trauma that propels the character to heroics. For Black heroes, parents are the cause of these traumas and ties into long standing racist tropes about Black families.

Despite the variety of backstories, superpowers, and personalities, all of these black superheroes offer disparaging perspectives of black political movements in the United States. No matter the hero or their perspective, white authors position the black hero as a respectable figure deserving of their power by positioning them outside of the black power movement. The decision, while a conscious narrative choice by authors, highlights the subconscious and overriding white political perspective that felt blackness needed to renounce black radicalism to be respectable. In these narratives, a Black person is only deserving of power if they support the hegemonic structures that inherently support systemic, institutional, and structural racism in the United States.

Even the most progressive and radical Black superhero finds themselves adhering to respectability politics. Whether they're policing Black communities or flying through space, writers attempt to show that these Black superheroes are respectable heroes that everyone can support. But this respectability stems from a white liberal lens. This lens inherently argues that Black communities should assimilate to white standards, which often extends to a justification for the heavy police presence in Black communities and the support of policies that reinforce systemic racism. Not only do these positions remove an American context, they conveniently ignore how American history has limited the upward mobility of Black communities.

As long as white liberalism dominates comic book media, the industry will continue to offer superficial depictions of black characters. These depictions will value white comfort over Black dignity and offer narratives that allow for self-congratulatory press while avoiding the discussion of difficult topics. White liberalism inherently prevents the discussion of racism in the United States, because it is more invested in perpetuating the status quo than challenging racist institutions.

For almost fifty years, Marvel and DC Comics continued to peddle white liberalism as their progressive credentials and post-racial dreams. This policy culminated with the debut of Miles Morales. Miles is an Afro-Latino superhero, and Marvel intended for him take over the single most popular franchise in all the comic book industry, Spider-Man.³⁵⁴ The decision to have Miles Morales headline a part of this popular franchise cannot be understated, but the reception of Miles Morales broke Marvel's adherence to white liberalism.

³⁵⁴ In terms of licensing, Spider-Man sells, on average, 1.3 billion dollars of merchandise a year. Batman, the second most licensed figure only sells 500 million. See: Alex Ben Block, "Which Superhero Earns 1.3 Billion a Year?" *Hollywood Reporter* November 13th, 2014. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/superhero-earns-13-billion-a-748281>

A Brand New Day?

The fallout of Miles Morales changed the understanding of representation at Marvel and DC Comics. Both Marvel and DC Comics seem to have realized the importance of race, gender, and sexual representation in their comics.³⁵⁵ On the page, Carol Danvers is now Captain Marvel, original X-Man Bobby Drake is gay, and Miles Morales continues to be Spider-Man. In the offices, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Roxanne Gay have been hired to write for Marvel Comics. Both authors were praised by critics for their use of black politics in their comics. The inclusion of more authors, artists, and editors of color provided significant changes to what comics were produced by major comic book companies.

Despite these changes, the primary audience of comic books continues to be white men. This continues, in part, because physical comics are sold in specialty shops. In comic stores, gatekeeping often occurs when people who do not look like the typical audience try to buy comics.³⁵⁶ Because of the larger culture surrounding comics and gatekeeping, women are far more likely to buy comics on eReaders than go into a local comic store.³⁵⁷ However, eReader and online comics are not counted in total readership data, nor made publicly available.

³⁵⁵ Trans characters have begun to appear though most are questionable depictions of these identities.

³⁵⁶ Gail Simone, a comic writer for decades, often encounters gatekeeping by various comic book fans on twitter, who question if she is a real fan or not, often in the wake of her making a feminist statement. For instance, during a controversy where some fans threatened to boycott Captain Marvel because the actress Brie Larson did not smile enough, Gail Simone pointed out how silly the smiling boycott was by asking if the Punisher should smile more. Some fans attempted to explain to Simone, who has written the Punisher, how the Punisher's backstory means he would not smile. While Simone often has lighthearted banter with Gatekeepers, other women and racial minority comic book authors and editors have been targeted by alt-right fans who feel they are trying to instill Political Correctness or a liberal agenda by introducing new LGBTQIA characters, racial minorities, or featuring women.

³⁵⁷ Noah Berlatsky, "The Female Thor and the Female Comic-Book Reader" *The Atlantic* July 21, 2014 <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/07/just-how-many-women-read-comic-books/374736/>

Comixology, an eReadership platform for comics launched in 2007, but did not begin to take hold until a decade later when Amazon bought the service, and Marvel and DC launched their own competing platforms.³⁵⁸ While not indicative of the active user base, more than 7 million people have downloaded the comiXology app, and the bestselling comic, *Action Comics 1000* sold 504,243 copies.³⁵⁹ I hope that future scholarship will be able to obtain this data as it will provide valuable insight in how Marvel and DC have approached their characters of color after abandoning their post-racial dreams.

Despite the shift away from white liberalism in recent years, the lessons of Miles Morales and post-racial society might have taught the wrong lesson. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Marvel cancelled a lot of their superheroes of color and all superheroines in favor of returning their white traditional superheroes. In the announcement, David Gabriel argued “what we heard was that people didn’t want any more diversity... We saw the sales of any character that was diverse, any character that was new, our female characters, anything that was not a core Marvel character, people were turning their nose up against.”³⁶⁰ This quotation heavily emphasizes how these corporations perceive their readership e.g. young white men and the perception of readership is shifting the comic book industry to continue to favor traditional heroes, e.g. straight white men, over minority, women, and gay superheroes.

³⁵⁸ Travis Clark, “Amazon's Comixology has provoked a fierce debate in the comic-book world, but creators say it could help revitalize the industry” *Business Insider*, November 9, 2018. Online: <https://www.businessinsider.com/amazons-comixology-could-revitalize-comic-books-creators-say-2018-11>

³⁵⁹ “2018 Comic Book Sales to Comics Shops” Comichron Accessed: January 30, 2019. Last Accessed: July 1, 2019. Online: <https://www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales/2018.html>

³⁶⁰ Asher Elbein, “The Real Reason for Marvel Comics’ Woes.” *The Atlantic*. May 24, 2017. www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/05/the-real-reasons-for-marvel-comics-woes/527127/

Media has long asked that minorities, women, and gay people identify with straight white men and the comic book industry adheres to this rule. Marvel's demand that McGregor include more white people was an editorial mandate built on the fear that white men would not purchase a comic book with a solely black cast. Similar sentiments were expressed with the debut of the 2018 film, *Black Panther*.³⁶¹ While people of color and women are asked to identify with characters that do not represent them, the comic book industry (and most popular culture) caters to white men.

Returning to Miles Morales, the introduction of a black Spider-man and the outcry from racist fans highlights how and why white liberalism ultimately fails to address race relations in the United States. Simply put, after four hundred years of racial slavery and a century as second-class citizens, not to mention institutional racism that continues to operate today, race holds a significant sway in the United States. While many hoped the election of Barack Obama would exemplify a post-racial America, instead we've witnessed return of white supremacy to the forefront of American society. Because white liberalism wants to move to a post-racial society immediately, it holds not possibility to address racism in the United States.

Comic books often feel very circular and recycle their long history in new and interesting ways as storylines continually revert back to the status quo. Behind the scenes, similar problems often take hold about how to address racism, misogyny, and homophobia. For instance, Marvel would borrow DC Comics' idea and have the Punisher switch his racial identity for a handful of issues almost two decades after Lois Lane had. Similarly, DC Comics launched "Rebirth" a

³⁶¹ Interestingly, many who questioned if *Black Panther* would do well because of the cast, attempted to sidestep American racism by questioning if Chinese audiences would see the film. This choice not only manages to highlight assumptions about predominantly black casts and whether audiences would identify with the heroes but also places the blame on another racial group. This argument allows for Hollywood to continue to cater to white audiences to the detriment of racial minorities.

comic wide event built on the premise of returning heroes to their status quo after five years prior DC Comics had launched New 52 to shake up their comic book universe. However, both companies have hired more writers and artists of color, and created new heroes of color, but white liberalism continues to perpetuate itself in editorial mandates and perceptions of readership. Because white liberalism operates as the default understanding of society, it continues to manifest and limit those that would attempt to discuss racism in the United States.

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